YEAR IN REVIEW: THE TOP 50 RELEASES OF 2022

AMERICA'S JAZZ MAGAZINE

JazzTimes

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2023

JOEY ALEXANDER

The Start of the Bali Sound

By Geoffrey Himes

BRAD MEHLDAU

Exclusive Book Excerpt

JOHN ESCREET

The Art of the Trio

AARON DIEHL

Before & After

KEYBOARD SPOTLIGHT

Danilo Pérez

Esbjörn Svensson

Brian Auger

Hilario Duran & David Virelles

Jason Yeager

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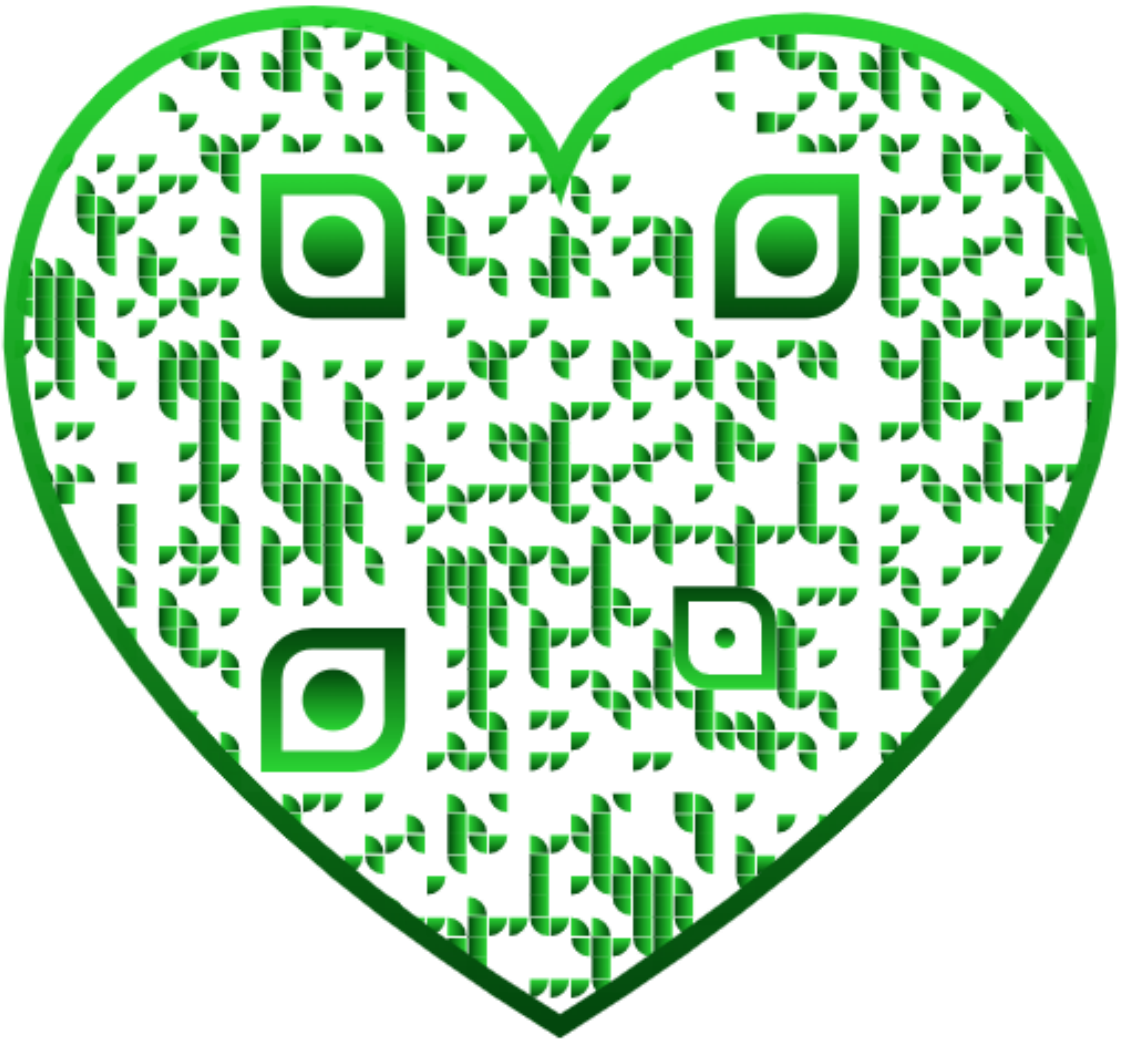

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JOE CHAMBERS
DANCE KOBINA

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BILL FRISELL
FOUR

Guitarist convenes a new line-up of musical friends with with **Greg Tardy**, **Gerald Clayton** & **Johnathan Blake** for this stunning meditation on loss, renewal & friendship.

HERE IT IS
A TRIBUTE TO LEONARD COHEN

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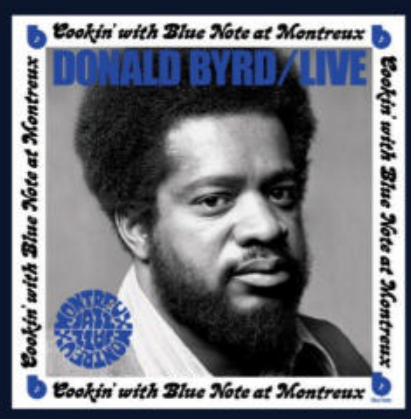
ELVIN JONES
REVIVAL: LIVE AT POOKIE'S PUB

Thrilling previously unissued 1967 live 3-LP set captures the master drummer's emergence as a bandleader with a quartet featuring **Joe Farrell**, **Billy Greene** & **Wilbur Little**.



DONALD BYRD
LIVE: COOKIN' WITH BLUE NOTE AT MONTREUX

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30 BRAD MEHLDAU
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→ Exclusive Content
For our latest *JazzTimes* 10 list, Michael J. West chooses 10 outstanding albums from the catalog of the late great alto saxophonist and bandleader Julian "Cannonball" Adderley. Plus album and festival reviews, obituaries, essays on key moments in jazz history by *JT* critic Colin Fleming, and more.

→ *JT* News
Lucía Gutiérrez Rebolloso, a 21-year-old vocalist born and raised in Veracruz, Mexico, took first place in the 11th Annual Sarah Vaughan International Jazz Vocal Competition, held Nov. 20 in front of a live audience at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC) in Newark, N.J. Second place went to Ekep Nkwelle, a singer/songwriter from Washington, D.C., and a past member of Howard University's vocal jazz ensemble Afro Blue. Third place belonged to Harlem-based Allan Harris, who noted that as a child he had seen the competition's namesake Sarah Vaughan perform live at the legendary Apollo Theater. Congratulations to all three singers, who led a pack of more than 200 entrants from 25 countries.

→ Audio & Video
Check out streams and downloads from Antonio Adolfo (pictured), HANKA G, Daniela Soledade, Michael Kaeshammer, Tracye Eileen, and more.

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SHAKIRU BOLA OKOYA (VAUGHAN COMPETITION); RODRIGO LOPES (ADOLFO)

The Triple-Double Quandary

Once again, the time has come for *JazzTimes*' Year in Review section, in which our critics choose their favorite new and historical jazz releases of the past year or so (that "or so" will prove important in a moment). This year, 22 writers—including yours truly—joined the fun.

Actually, I shouldn't mislead you; it wasn't all jollity. There were significant challenges to be worked out this year, the most serious of which I'm calling "the triple-double quandary." Charles Lloyd put out three albums in 2022 that were linked by a common theme, or more accurately a common instrumental configuration: the drumless trio. Those three albums were then packaged together in a three-disc set called *Trio of Trios*. Similarly, Mary Halvorson released two albums simultaneously, *Amaryllis* and *Belladonna*, which clearly referenced one another and were also later repackaged as a single two-disc set. So what should our critics do: vote for the full package as one "album" or for the separate discs? In the end, after much agonizing, we opted for separate discs, figuring that at least some people would prefer one over the other(s), which was indeed how it turned out.

By the way, don't get me started on the problem of Wadada Leo Smith, who put out so many albums this year—his 80th—that I honestly lost track. He wound up in our top 50 twice, which seems unfair as it barely conveys the enormity of the contribution he made to jazz in 2022; on the other hand, having a top 50 mostly made up of one man's albums would have been, let's face it, a little weird.

One further dilemma we *didn't* have to face was what to do about the two Ahmad Jamal live sets recorded at Seattle's Penthouse club, one dating from 1963-64 and the other from 1965-66. That's because the Jamal albums were released one week past our Year in Review eligibility cutoff date of Nov. 11—a date that also disqualified a flood of other releases in mid-to-late November. But our final painful reckoning with this matter has, of course, only been postponed until next year. Such are the sacrifices we make for *JazzTimes* readers.

—MAC RANDALL

Sour Notes: Our November/December reviews section was plagued by several errors. A.D. Amorosi's review of the Sun Ra Arkestra's *Living Sky* attested that Marshall Allen has led the ensemble since Sun Ra's death in 1993. This is untrue; saxophonist John Gilmore took Ra's place for two years until his own passing in 1995. David Whiteis' review of two Leonard Cohen tribute albums stated that Cohen was still alive and working at the time that one of them, Art of Time Ensemble's *Songs of Leonard Cohen Live,* was recorded; in fact, he had passed away more than a year earlier. And Nicole Zuraitis' name was misspelled twice in Ken Micallef's review of Sonica's debut album. Also in that same issue, Alan Nahigian was inadvertently not credited for the photograph of Louis Hayes on pg. 20 and Pat Metheny's *From This Place* album was misidentified as *From This Time* in Ted Panken's cover story on Antonio Sánchez. We regret the errors.

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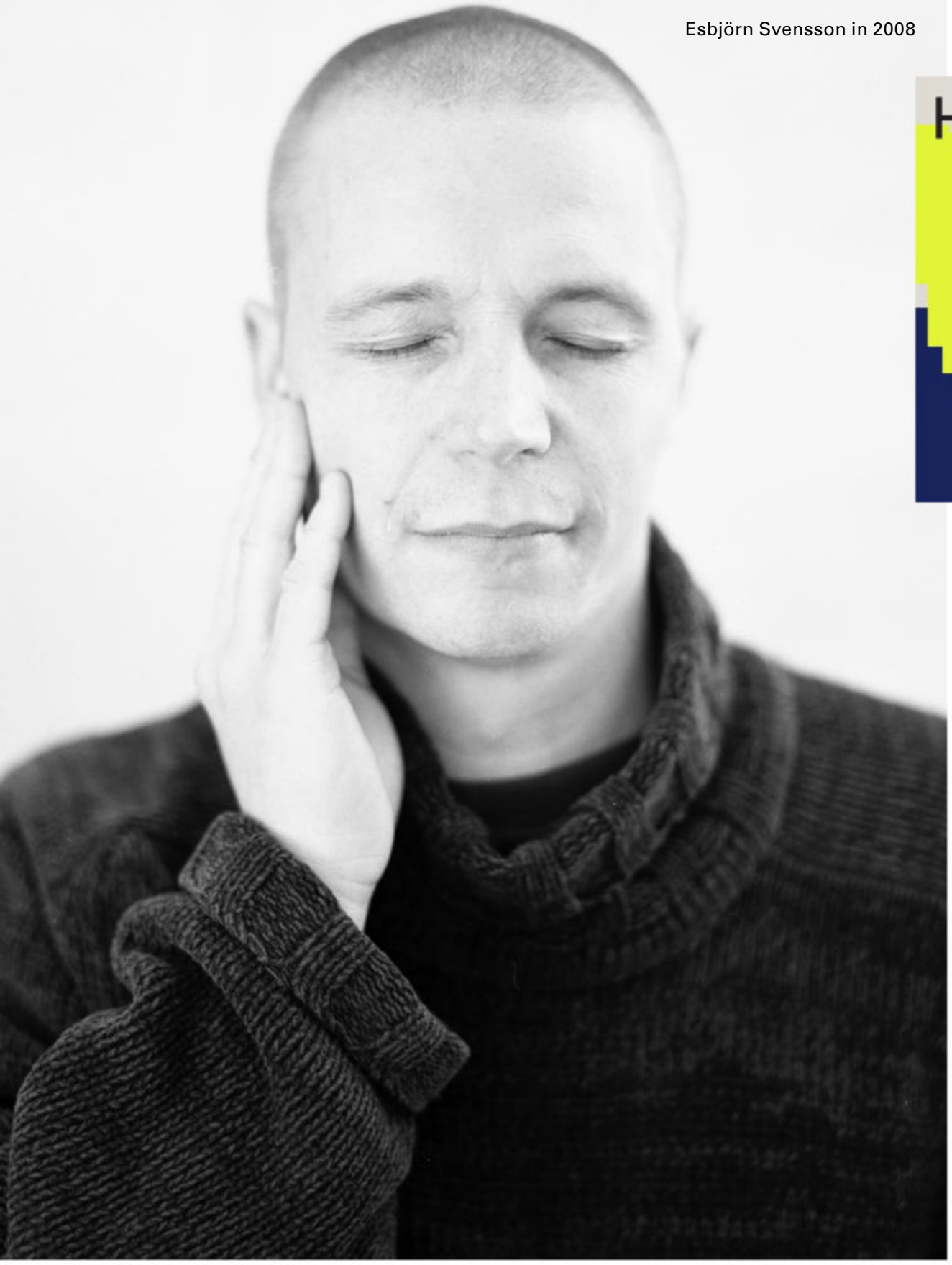

Esbjörn Svensson in 2008

Buried Treasure

A recently discovered 2008 solo album shows a different side of the late ESBJÖRN SVENSSON

The tragic 2008 scuba-diving death of Swedish pianist Esbjörn Svensson also marked the sudden end of one of Europe's most popular contemporary jazz outfits, the eponymous e.s.t. (Esbjörn Svensson Trio). Along with bassist Dan Berglund and drummer Magnus Öström, Svensson had fashioned a hybrid approach that incorporated elements from multiple genres and leading-edge technology, appealing to a sizable audience outside of the core jazz fest and clubgoing crowd.

As adventurous as he was, few of Svensson's associates—not his bandmates, not his engineer, not even his wife Eva—were aware that, just weeks before his passing, the 44-year-old had recorded new music in his home that would have extended his reach even further: a solo piano recording, comprising nine self-composed songs that bear little in common with Svensson's progressive e.s.t. canon. Stashed away on hard drives for 10 years in Eva's personal archive, the recordings—made without another person present—were not exactly forgotten; they had never even been heard by anyone but their creator.

Now, after an initial public airing at a series of audiovisual concerts in Stockholm in September 2022, they are being released by ACT Music under the title *HOME.S.*

After discovering the recording, Eva Svensson took it to the Gothenburg, Sweden, home of Åke Linton, e.s.t.'s career-long sound engineer. In a Q&A distributed with the album's publicity material, Eva Svensson recalled, "We pressed the start button … There was total silence and we couldn't speak for the entire time the music was playing. After it finished … we were both so touched and surprised … that it was so beautiful."

Linton, too, was astonished by what he'd heard. "We were like, 'Wow, this is something we didn't expect at all,'" he says. "We knew that one day we were gonna do something with this."

First, though, Linton wanted to be sure that there wasn't more of this music hiding out someplace. "I said, 'I think I'll make a couple of calls to people in Stockholm that he might have done this recording with.' I called other engineers, even piano tuners. No one knew anything about the record." Even Öström, the former e.s.t. drummer, heard it for the first time along with

KATARINA GRIP HÖÖK © ACT MUSIC

others attending one of the Stockholm concerts, held at Sven Harry Museum of Modern Art. There, Linton played the music on a specially designed surround-sound system, accompanied by visuals created by Anders Amrén, e.s.t.'s longtime lighting designer.

Indeed, for anyone familiar with e.s.t.'s recorded output, it takes a minute to accept that these introspective solo tracks, each assigned a title corresponding with a letter in the Greek alphabet, are the work of the late Swede. Certainly, Svensson's more reserved side did show up occasionally in the trio's work (give a listen to "Ajar" on the posthumously released *Leucocyte* album, or the laconic, bluesy shuffle "Where We Used to Live" on 2006's *Tuesday Wonderland*). But the whispery, imagistic playing on *HOME.S.* puts out a different vibe, one that suggests Svensson was making this music for his own satisfaction, unconcerned about whether it was ever heard outside of the basement where it was recorded.

Stashed away for 10 years, the recordings weren't exactly forgotten; they'd never even been heard by anyone but their creator.

"I think he did it," Linton says, "because, as with all bands, you work and you work and you work, and even if you really like the people you're working with, you need to do something else."

Does Linton believe that these pieces might someday have been headed for an e.s.t. album? "I don't think so, because somehow this sounds so complete," he says, adding, "I just hope that people who hear it will feel that he's still around, that he's still making people happy with his music."

—JEFF TAMARKIN

NEW GROOVES

3 FEBRUARY

Brandon Ross & Pendulum
Of Sight & Sound
Sunnyside

The veteran guitarist, one-third of the spectacular Harriet Tubman trio, presents a very different kind of project here, the result of a collaboration between his own Pendulum quartet and visual artist Ford Crull.

17 FEBRUARY

Simon Moullier
Isla
Simon Moullier Music

For his third album, the innovative vibraphonist teams with pianist Lex Korten, bassist Alexander Claffy, and drummer Jongkuk Kim, mixing originals and standards.

3 MARCH

Kendrick Scott
Corridors
Blue Note

Shaun Brady raved about the vaunted drummer's trio album with saxophonist Walter Smith III and bassist Reuben Rogers in our October issue, calling it "resonant with both loss and hope." Unfortunately, we jumped the gun on the review; the album release got pushed to March.

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Jason Yeager

Suite Centennial

JASON YEAGER marks author Kurt Vonnegut's hundredth birthday in fitting fashion

Pianist and composer Jason Yeager has no problem detailing the inspiration he draws from literary hero Kurt Vonnegut's work: "I just love the way that he uses precise, clear language in a rather direct way to get his point across. His writing is sophisticated, but it's always pretty easy to read. Vonnegut writes page-turners. And I love his sense of imagination, the way he blends elements of science fiction and social criticism and humor. Vonnegut is hilarious, poking fun at the elite, the way the world [operates], and the absurdity of human life and society. Yet that cynicism is paired with a deeply felt love for humanity."

All of those authorial hallmarks feed into and grow out of the absorbing music on Yeager's *Unstuck in Time: The Kurt Vonnegut Suite*. Recorded in late 2021 and released on November 11, 2022—the exact date of the Vonnegut centennial—this magnum opus is clearly bound to the present moment. But in embracing the titular phrase, which nods to *Slaughterhouse-Five* character Billy Pilgrim's unmoored nature, the album's origin story simultaneously looks to different points in the past.

Since the pianist's grandfather and great-grandfather worked with the writer's father as partners in the architectural firm of Vonnegut, Wright & Yeager in Indianapolis in the 1940s, that would seem to be the logical place to start. But that's not really where this tale begins. "Even though I was somewhat aware of this relationship between our families," Yeager shares, "I didn't really check out Vonnegut's writing too early. I was well into my twenties, living in New York, when I started to get into it." In 2013, at that stage of Yeager's life, the aforementioned Vonnegut classic came to rest on his nightstand. And while reading and thinking deeply about the protagonist, and entertaining an invitation to bring an original to a gig with saxophonist Kyle Nasser, he penned the wonderfully bewildered "Blues for Billy Pilgrim."

> ***"It's almost like the Yeager and Vonnegut families are once again collaborating."***

Unbeknownst to anybody at the time, that was a true-jumping-off point.

As the months and years went by, and Yeager worked through the pages of other Vonnegut novels and stories, more artistically aligned instrumentals emerged. Then, when given the opportunity to showcase a project at the Cell Theatre in Manhattan in 2016, the idea for a Vonnegut suite came together. That initial performance saw the birth of a septet that spoke to big-band and orchestral ambitions, and the group's strengths and sensibilities deepened in the years ramping up to this release. Tapping works like Vonnegut's *Timequake*, *The Sirens of Titan* and *Cat's Cradle* to fuel his expansive writing, Yeager creates smart settings with well-wrought counterpoint while leveraging the talents of distinctive personalities including alternating multi-reedists Lucas Pino and Patrick Laslie, chair-swapping trumpeters Alphonso Horne and Riley Mulherkar, and trombonist Mike Fahie in the winds department; vibraphonist Yuhan Su, bassist Danny Weller and drummer Jay Sawyer in the rhythm sphere; and guest alto saxophonist Miguel Zenón, who enhances two numbers. Brilliantly blurring lines between composition and improvisation, the ensemble delivers music that, reflective of its influence's style, is both complex and highly accessible.

Save for one outlier—"So It Goes," sewn together in post-production with snippets of outtakes and spoken-word recordings—every number was created live in the studio. And Yeager shares credit with the musicians, plus co-producers Andy Warren and Frank Carlberg, for the clarity in the resultant album. In fairness, he also praises the contributions of an important spectral presence standing by his side: "Although I composed and arranged all of the music on this record, I always joke that the ghost of Kurt Vonnegut was my unwitting co-composer. In a sense, it's almost like the Yeager and Vonnegut families are once again collaborating."

—DAN BILAWSKY

CHRIS DRUKKER

David Virelles (L) and Hilario Duran

Cuba Across the Generations

HILARIO DURAN and DAVID VIRELLES come together for *Front Street Duets*

The last time Hilario Duran, the 69-year-old Cuban Canadian piano master and composer, teamed up with another pianist was in 2017, when he performed duets at a concert in Germany with his legendary friend and fellow Cuban émigré Chucho Valdés, accompanied by the WDR Big Band. Until now.

Recently Toronto producer Peter Cardinali asked Duran to create an album for his Alma label. "Peter suggested a duet format with a pianist of the younger generation," Duran said recently by Zoom from his Toronto home. "Without hesitation I immediately thought of David Virelles. I think he's the most mature as an artist and as a pianist."

The result is *Front Street Duets*, a mix of original Duran compositions with a pair of Cuban standards and, as a closing number, a spectacular Cubano take on "Body and Soul." Throughout the album, Duran and Virelles play traditional Afro-Cuban styles like *guajira* and *punto cubano* with generous opportunities for the two pianists to improvise. Duran and Virelles play, with fiery commitment, music that is simultaneously romantic and intellectually challenging, densely orchestral, and grounded in an ever-present Cuban *tumbao*.

ON STAGE

16
FEBRUARY

Biamp PDX Jazz Festival (Portland, OR): A performance by the Bill Frisell Four featuring Johnathan Blake, Gerald Clayton, and Gregory Tardy will open this annual Northwest confab, which runs through Feb. 25 and features dozens more artists.

Over a career spanning more than 45 years, Duran has won three Juno Awards, a Grammy nomination, and a host of other honors, recording more than a dozen albums, including duos, trios, and big bands. I caught him live recently when Chucho Valdés' tour visited the Berklee Performance Center in Boston; Duran was serving as co-musical director (with John Beasley) of Chucho's big band.

"Since my early twenties, Chucho was my mentor," Duran told me. In the Havana of the 1970s, the young Duran was a student of Western classical music obsessed with jazz when Valdés took him under his wing. Soon he began subbing for the older man in the Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna, the nation's most modern big band.

"Subbing for him changed my life," Duran said. Before long, Duran began writing arrangements for Irakere, Valdés' pioneering jazz and Afro-Cuban band, which also spawned trumpeter Arturo Sandoval and sax/clarinetist Paquito D'Rivera. After all three emigrated, Duran followed. He joined Sandoval's band as musical director, arranger, and pianist for nine years, touring the world and performing with Dizzy Gillespie and Michel Legrand.

Virelles, another Cuban émigré and Duran's junior by 30 years, had been a longtime admirer of Duran before he met him in Toronto. They were introduced by Jane Bunnett, the Canadian saxophonist, flutist, and Cuban music bandleader. Duran played in her band for years; Virelles began subbing for him after he landed in Toronto. Virelles eventually departed for New York, where he has become one of the most heralded pianists of his generation, recording as a leader for Pi and ECM. He has played and recorded with Henry Threadgill, Andrew Cyrille, Ravi Coltrane, Mark Turner, Chris Potter, Tomasz Stanko, Steve Coleman and Wadada Leo Smith, and many more.

"To me, the album is a continuation of hundreds of years of Cuban piano culture," Virelles said by phone. "Hilario and I have different sets of [musical] influences, but there's a collective consciousness that both of us come out of. This album is basically an effort to contribute to that lineage."

The chemistry between the two pianists makes for a remarkable listening experience: It often sounds as if one is listening to one pianist with four hands, albeit spanning two pianos. Duran agreed: "David and I have the same background and roots in Cuba. We understood each other very well. The only difficulty is that sometimes you can't tell who's improvising—David or me—because we sound almost the same. I mean, we have different styles, but they blend together really well."

—ALLEN MORRISON

JAKE THOMAS

Taurey Butler, in Oscar Peterson's shadow

Moving North

TAUREY BUTLER finds a home away from home

Montreal-based pianist Taurey Butler, a native of East Orange, N.J., journeyed through Singapore, Thailand, drums, and horns before arriving at the piano, jazz, and his adopted city. On his recent trio recording *One of the Others* (Justin Time), he tells the story of this journey through 11 tunes, both originals and reimagined standards. It's a story of migration and relocation, of finding a new home away from home, and of Butler's roots as an African American.

The album art, created by Butler, demonstrates this as well. "I don't have that artistic technique, but I knew the concept I wanted on the cover," he told *JT*. Alluding to *The Migration Series* by Jacob Lawrence, it depicts "the migration of Black people from the southern U.S. to the north in search of jobs, opportunity and a more prosperous life. ... It's me in the lower left corner, heading north."

Butler, 48, grew up listening to his father play drums with an R&B band, and at age seven began classical piano training. At 14 he was handed an Oscar Peterson recording by his perceptive bandleader; listening to Peterson opened Butler's ears to what the piano could do. Moved and intrigued, he began digging into jazz harmony, melody, and solo improvisation. After graduating from Dartmouth—where he studied Japanese, majored in electrical engineering, and spent countless hours in the practice room—Butler returned to New Jersey to hone his craft. And after playing a jam session in New York, garnering attention for his dexterity and lyricism, he began booking gigs, eventually playing clubs and festivals around the world.

Following a long stint with Chicago bassist/vocalist Eldee Young in Asia, Butler was invited to play at Montreal's House of Jazz. He'd been exploring the hometown of Peterson, his greatest idol, and finally decided to move there, playing the club three nights a week for 10 years. He also accompanied Juno Award-winning vocalist Ranee Lee, and in 2011 released his self-titled debut on Justin Time.

Now a prominent figure on the Montreal jazz scene, Butler regularly plays the city's main clubs, including Dièse Onze and Upstairs Bar and Grill, as well as the Festival International de Jazz de Montréal, and he recently accompanied saxophonist Nicole Glover at the new Saint-Henri jazz festival. Thanks to his innate swing, breakneck speed, seemingly effortless technique, and imaginative sourcing of the music, Butler has been compared to Peterson as well as McCoy Tyner and other piano luminaries.

One of the Others' official launch—two sold-out sets at the intimate Upstairs on a crisp autumn night—featured the personnel on the album: Michigan-born, Montreal-based drummer Wali Muhammad (Oliver Jones, Jeri Brown, the Metropolitan Orchestra) and gifted Montreal bassist Morgan Moore. "This is my first album in 10 years," Butler noted from the bandstand. Why so long? "I didn't want to just release another record without anything tying the songs together," he said, launching full steam into the joyous title track.

"Like most people, I take the culture and the roots of the things that I've learned with me wherever I go. This album was a perfect follow-up to my first album," Butler later told *JT*. "I've had time to reflect and get to know Montreal better, and those experiences are what the album is based on."

The funky "Sisyphean Task" elicited some headbanging from the audience. "There were some good things too, starting over in Montreal," Butler noted. Cole Porter's "What Is This Thing Called Love" took an angular, Monk-ish turn; the tender "Laini's Love," written for Butler's mother, conveyed a depth of intensely felt emotion.

"Without you, this is just a rehearsal," said Butler, thanking the crowd before closing with the vigorous "On the Natch." Heading out, I caught up with a Swiss audience member, all smiles. What did he appreciate about the concert? "They played so *together*," he said. "So imaginative and inspired."

—SHARONNE COHEN

SHARONNE COHEN

Farewells

Mick Goodrick

Mick Goodrick, a guitarist and teacher who was arguably the most influential guitar pedagogue in the history of jazz, died Nov. 16 at his home in Boston, Mass. He was 77. The cause of death was complications from COVID-19; he had also recently been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. An accomplished performer in his own right, Goodrick worked with John Abercrombie and Jack DeJohnette, toured with Gary Burton and Pat Metheny and Charlie Haden's Liberation Music Orchestra, and briefly worked with the Woody Herman Orchestra. He found his true calling, however, as an educator. He was a faculty member at both Berklee College of Music and the New England Conservatory—where his students included John Scofield, Bill Frisell, Mike Stern, Rale Micic, Lage Lund, Wolfgang Muthspiel, and Julian Lage—and he reached countless other pupils through his 1987 book *The Advancing Guitarist*. Students affectionally referred to him as "Mr. Goodchord."

Kelly Sill, a composer, educator, and go-to bassist on the Chicago jazz scene for more than three decades, died on Sept. 28. He was 70. Sill worked with artists such as Art Blakey, Joe Henderson, Art Farmer, Eddie Jefferson, Clark Terry, Cedar Walton, and Herb Ellis, and appeared on more than 50 recordings as either a sideman or a leader.

Arnold Jay Smith, a jazz writer, educator, and archivist who worked as East Coast editor for *DownBeat*, contributed to numerous publications, and taught at the New School in Manhattan for 26 years, died Oct. 4 at his home in Brooklyn, N.Y. He was 83 and had been dealing with complications of diabetes and COVID-19. In 2021, Smith donated his collection of 10,000 jazz albums to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Chuck Deardorf, a bassist and educator who headed the jazz department at Seattle's Cornish College of the Arts for 14 years, died Oct. 9 of complications from hereditary kidney disease and COVID-19 at Virginia Mason Medical Center in Seattle. He was 68.

Terry Woodson, a trombonist, arranger, librarian, copyist, conductor, and record producer, died at his home in Studio City, Calif., on Oct. 19. He was 80. Woodson joined the Don Ellis band in 1966 and recorded four albums with the innovative trumpeter/bandleader, including 1967's *Electric Bath*. After leaving Ellis in 1968, he conducted and toured with the orchestras of

Terry Woodson (2nd from L) with the Henry Mancini Orchestra during a 1972 TV broadcast

Percy Faith and Henry Mancini; produced recordings for Diane Schuur, Diana Krall, Monica Mancini, Linda Ronstadt, and others; but spent the bulk of his career—19 years—conducting for Frank Sinatra, Jr.

Anthony Ortega, a California-based clarinetist, saxophonist, and flutist who worked with artists including Lionel Hampton, Paul Bley, Tony Bennett, Quincy Jones, and Frank Zappa, died Oct. 30 of complications from pneumonia at a hospital in Encinitas, Calif. He was 94. Ortega was still performing regularly at Mr. Peabody's Bar and Grill in Encinitas just two months before his passing.

Michael G. Nastos, a jazz journalist and radio DJ in Michigan best known for his long-running shows on WCBN-FM and WEMU-FM, died Nov. 5. He was 70 and had been struggling with multiple health problems.

David Ornette Cherry, a multi-instrumentalist, composer, and poet who worked to merge the-

David Ornette Cherry

jazz tradition with classical and various African and world music traditions, died Nov. 20 in a London hotel room from an asthma attack following a performance at the Barbican Theatre. He was 64. The son of trumpeter/composer Don Cherry, he was a devotee of his father's "Multikulti" conception of music and his own work encompassed development of that fusion in its own right, as well as frequent tributes to his father (and his mother, pianist Carletta Hewitt-Cherry). Indeed, Cherry's final performance on the night of his passing was a tribute concert to his father, performed with Kahil El'Zabar's Ethnic Heritage Ensemble.

Louise Tobin, a singer of the big-band era who married trumpeter Harry James in 1935 and began working with his onetime employer Benny Goodman four years later, died Nov. 26 in Carrollton, Texas. She was 104. After becoming a mother, Tobin retired from music for several years but made a striking comeback at the 1962 Newport Jazz Festival, which led to a relaunch of her career as she and her new husband, clarinetist Peanuts Hucko, opened a jazz club in Denver and toured worldwide with the Glenn Miller Orchestra and the Pied Piper Quartet, among others.

Andrew Speight, an Australian-born saxophonist and educator who moved to America in the early 1990s, collaborated with Wynton Marsalis, and eventually became a teacher at San Francisco State University, died Dec. 1 when his car was hit by two trains near his home in Burlingame, Calif. He was 58. ***JT***

COURTESY OF BRUCE KLAUBER (MANCINI ORCHESTRA)

Joe Williams at the 1967 Newport Jazz Festival

Highlights from the Williams catalog

Beyond the Blues

JOE WILLIAMS was famous for one thing, but he did a lot more

BY MARK STRYKER

Everyone knows that Joe Williams sang the hell out of the blues, but do you know what else he sang the hell out of?

Everything.

Williams' expansive wheelhouse encompassed romantic ballads, songs of heartbreak, swinging standards, bossa novas, and boogaloo beats. He could improvise like a stylish horn player or phrase down the middle like a sophisticated pop singer. He was even a credible scat singer, though it wasn't a strength. Williams could do more things as well or better than just about any other postwar male jazz singer.

Yet his identity remains inextricably tied to the blues hits that defined his six-and-a-half-year tenure with the Count Basie Orchestra, from 1954-1961: "Every Day I Have the Blues," "Alright, Okay, You Win," and "The Comeback." These numbers and others like them were integral to the singer's repertoire until his death in 1999 at age 80.

The critical discourse around Williams during his life often circled around this duality. As late as 1986, Whitney Balliett could write in *The New Yorker* that Williams was in fact two equally accomplished singers: "One is the famous blues singer, and the other is the almost unknown ballad singer."

One reason Williams remains typecast is that most of his finest recordings—five LPs taped for RCA Victor between 1963 and 1965 and a glorious one-off for Solid State with the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra from 1966—are hidden in plain sight. They capture Williams' effulgent bass-baritone at its peak of expression and best document his versatility, swing, storytelling, and sublime balance of gutsy power, restrained elegance, and taste.

These records have a checkered past in terms of falling in and out of print, though all made it to CD at some point and all are

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available via streaming services. Anyone looking for a deeper understanding of Williams' art should start here.

Chicago-raised, Williams was 36 but still a work in progress when Basie rescued him from obscurity. Despite the success of his 1955 debut LP with the band, *Count Basie Swings, Joe Williams Sings* (Verve), there's still a bluntness to his blues elocutions, and his early ballads often come across as one-dimensional. You can chart a steady progression toward more subtle expression through his Roulette LPs with strings, among them *Sings About You!* (1959) and *Sentimental & Melancholy* (1960).

By 1963, Williams had matured. His voice, always as full-bodied and opulent as a Barolo, now boasts a balanced suppleness in the finish that translates to a larger dramatic range. His vibrato, coloring, and accents are more carefully modulated, more attuned to the nuances of a song's layered emotions. His pitch is more centered, his swing even more authoritative. Absorbing Basie's less-is-more aesthetic taught Williams the value of understatement. The singer *never* forces the issue.

By 1963, Williams' voice, always as full-bodied as a Barolo, boasted a balanced suppleness in the finish.

Jump for Joy (1963), his tremendous RCA debut with big-band arrangements by Oliver Nelson and Jimmy Jones, opens ecstatically. Williams glides through a swinging "Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams" with the relaxed confidence of a man in a hand-tailored suit. Dig his call-and-response exchanges with the band in the second chorus, where he gradually spreads his melodic wings before soaring into a resplendent rise-and-fall variation in quarter-note triplets on the bridge.

Williams had an ear for worthy, neglected songs. There are several on *Jump for Joy*, including Helen Bliss' obscure 1941 torch song "I Went Out of My Way," which receives a bittersweet, 2-a.m. reading à la Sinatra. "A Good Thing" and "She Doesn't Know" were written for Williams by Marvin Fisher and Jack Segal—adult love songs that he sings with the knowing air of not only a man who has been around the block in life but also an artist able to transform his experiences and emotions via craft into art. *That's* the ballgame.

On "A Good Thing," note the patience with which Williams sings, "I'm glad that loneliness and heartache taught me just how much I needed you." He stretches out the word "needed" with an extra dollop of vibrato that intensifies its meaning.

While there are no formal blues on *Jump for Joy*, the next studio date, *Me and the Blues*, throws Williams back into the briar patch with charismatic results. These RCA records were first-class major-label projects: the cream of New York studio players (Clark Terry, Phil Woods, Osie Johnson, etc.), top arrangers like Nelson and Jones, and beautiful engineering by Ray Hall in resonant Webster Hall. The steady hand of veteran producer George Avakian is palpable.

Avakian conceived *At Newport '63* to showcase a casual vibe. Williams, frisky and loose, fronts a hot four-horn band with stars like Coleman Hawkins that leans into a blues-dominated set for an appreciative audience.

The final RCA records, *The Song Is You* and *The Exciting Joe Williams*, return to the studio with a new producer (Jim Foglesong) and arranger (Frank Hunter). The songs are ballads and standards with a beat. Williams is in strong voice, but commercial motivations are more on the surface, especially on *The Song Is You*, which goes all in with strings and occasional vocal choir. *The Exciting* was Williams' own favorite RCA date. Sometimes it lives up to its title—he generates awe-inspiring swing on "This Is the Life"—but Hunter's Nelson Riddle/Billy May-flavored charts are overly gussy and there are a couple duds aimed at airplay.

Presenting Joe Williams and Thad Jones Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra is a classic. Jones' inspired arrangements are full of exhilarating details like the slithery sax section soli on "It Don't Mean a Thing." The band roars, and Williams roars back on the mostly blues and blues-flavored material. Best of all is a moving reading of Ellington's de facto spiritual "Come Sunday" that finds Williams reaching deep into his soul to create a masterpiece. ***JT***

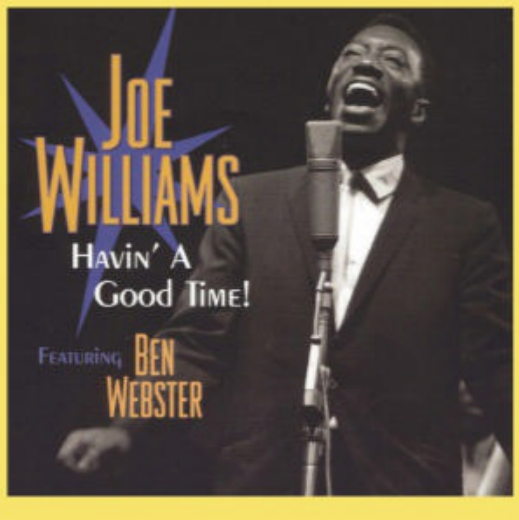
FURTHER LISTENING

Have a Good Time
(Roulette)

Ernie Wilkins arranged this rewarding all-standards date in 1961 that includes a stunning version of "Old Folks."

Something Old, New and Blue
(Solid State)

A reunion with arranger Thad Jones in 1967 with a studio band and strings. Not on the level of the LP with Thad & Mel but still a gem with more standards in the mix.



Havin' a Good Time
(Hyena)

Williams in superb voice with his grooving trio—Junior Mance, Bob Cranshaw, Mickey Roker—and guest Ben Webster at a club in Providence, R.I., in 1964. (Released in 2005.).

Aaron Diehl

The eclectic pianist's main mission: only connect

BY TED PANKEN

"My overall goal is trying to figure out how to connect the languages of jazz and classical to make an interesting and engaging performance, and also develop my own voice," Aaron Diehl told me when I first wrote about him in 2010. "Why limit yourself to just playing something here and something there? It's all gold."

That the 37-year-old pianist has refined and expanded that statement of purpose is evident on three recent albums—as leader on *The Vagabond*, from 2020 (Diehl's third for Mack Avenue), and as sideman on fellow pan-genre explorer Tyshawn Sorey's expansively abstract-to-consonant 2022 releases *Mesmerism* (Yeros7) and *The Off-Off Broadway Guide to Synergism* (Pi). As Diehl remarked on Zoom from his Harlem apartment before listening to the 11 selections that comprise his first Before & After: "I'm interested in the jazz language as a continuum—threading together its evolution as a continual, interrelated stream of development to create a sound that's neither old or new, but simply a landscape where we can all communicate."

Joined on *The Vagabond* by bassist Paul Sikivie and drummer Greg Hutchinson, Diehl opens the recital with seven originals that refract and interrogate raw materials harvested from an expansive field of influence: a Bach-to-Ravel notion of the Euro-canon, church hymns, stride, bebop, the blues. He ends it with idiomatically apropos interpretations of repertoire by role models John Lewis and Roland Hanna, and—foreshadowing his engagement with Sorey—a frisky deconstruction of Prokofiev's "March from *Ten Pieces for Piano*, Op. 12," followed by a meditative turn through Philip Glass' minimalist "Piano Etude No. 16."

Diehl entered Glass' musical world in 2014, when the composer invited him to participate in a Brooklyn Academy of Music concert comprising all 20 of his piano etudes. "Many times I had doubts about whether my interest in this music was valid," Diehl says of this early foray into transidiomatic expression. "A mentor even asked why I'm trying to play classical music, why I'm not with the soldiers of jazz. Well, I love jazz. But everything that I do is influenced by and incorporates all of my interests in music; it doesn't have to be restricted to a specific approach or style or genre or idiom."

He adds that interacting with Sorey has "solidified" this predisposition."Tyshawn has been a revelation," Diehl says. "He does so many different things on an extremely high level: serial music, 12-tone. His capacity for music, the things he understands and knows, is endless. His mind works in unique ways. For me, the goal is to play any written material and impart such an organic feeling that it sounds improvised, and to improvise music with a structure, a form, and a sense of direction that sounds written. When I hear Tyshawn play—when I hear all of his pieces—I hear that. I feel the greatest musicians, whether Bach or Charlie Parker, did that at the highest level."

Something close to what Diehl describes transpires on *Mesmerism*, an in-studio trio date with Matt Brewer recorded in spring 2021. "Tyshawn called and said, 'I want to do a trio record with you and Matt,'" Diehl recalls. "'Can we rehearse a day before the recording?' I said, 'I want to be prepared.' He said, 'That's okay. We'll just play tunes.' He came by my place with Matt, and started to dictate arrangements of 'Autumn Leaves' and tunes by Paul Motian and Muhal Richard Abrams: 'We'll play the first eight twice and then the B is half time, and then the last eight is double time,' and so on. I spent half the night trying to make sure I had the right roadmap

MARIA JARZYNA

for the recording next morning. I thought Tyshawn did that on purpose. He knows me well enough now to know that I like to have a handle on things, and his whole approach was, 'No, we're just going to listen to each other. We have our structure, and we'll see what happens.'

"Many musicians have varied interests, but people tend to want to pigeonhole them into doing a certain thing and that's it. The key—and the hard part—is how you incorporate all your interests into an organic entity."

1. Earl Hines

"Heaven"

(*Earl Hines Plays Duke Ellington*, New World). Hines, solo piano; Duke Ellington, composer. Recorded in 1975.

BEFORE: [*30 seconds in*] I have this album. It's *Earl Hines Plays Duke Ellington*. [*Pulls out LP*] I can't remember what this tune is called. One of the first Earl Hines solos I learned was the break on "Beau Koo Jack," at Eric Reed's suggestion, and I also played "Weather Bird" with Dominic Farinacci my first year of college. During those years, I listened to the recordings Hines made at the Village Vanguard with Coleman Hawkins and Roy Eldridge during the 1960s—it's some of the most unique piano playing I've ever heard, very modernistic sound and approach, so different from the way he played in the 1920s. I always notice how Earl Hines seemed to break up the time between his left hand and right hand. But it was just an illusion. The time is still there; he placed the syncopation to make it seem to be in another place. The immediate word that comes to mind about his playing is "angularity." It's kind of like climbing a mountain, where you'll find rocks with rough edges and rocks with smoother edges. His piano playing is so kaleidoscopic: different colors, different ways of using syncopation, displacement of the beat, dynamics. He's a very lyrical musician. As I say, he's unique. Now I want to go in an Earl Hines rabbit hole!

2. Stefano Bollani

"Rhapsody in Blue"

(*Gershwin & More ... Live!*, Philology). Bollani, piano; Roberto Gatto, drums; George Gershwin, composer. Recorded in 2002.

BEFORE: This is obviously someone who really knows the piece, inside and out. It's not just an abstraction of it. Random guess: Friedrich Gulda?

No, but you're on the right continent. John Taylor? Let me keep listening. I'm thinking of Michel Camilo, though he's not European. Or Stefano Bollani. It's Stefano? [*Laughs*]

AFTER: I thought it might be a European pianist familiar with European classical pianism and the whole jazz language. I couldn't immediately guess Stefano because I don't know his playing well enough. I was introduced to him years ago through his duo stuff with Enrico Rava, and we met five or six years ago when he came to a concert I was playing with Cécile McLorin Salvant in Luxembourg. Then I heard Stefano play *Rhapsody in Blue* with Alan Gilbert and the [New York] Philharmonie Orchestra right before the pandemic, and started to check out his wor. I need to investigate and study a lot more.

> ***"Earl Hines seemed to break up the time between his left hand and right hand. But it was just an illusion."***

I like the approach of establishing the theme and making it clear that this is *Rhapsody in Blue* and then venturing off into another stratosphere. *Rhapsody in Blue* has become this iconic piece, but I don't think Gershwin ever considered it or would have imagined it [being] considered a masterpiece—he wrote it very quickly when he was very young. Of course, the themes are incredible and memorable, but the structure isn't very defined. It's a series of motifs interspersed with cadenzas. As a result, a lot can be done in between the themes. Stefano didn't even go into the E-major theme right there. That first theme [*sings it*] was his springboard for variation and improvisation. It would have been cool to see what he'd do with the E-major theme if they had transitioned into it.

I've had my own experiences playing cadenzas on *Rhapsody in Blue* with orchestras. People lose their mind when it's different. I had a very bizarre review in Providence, Rhode Island, some years ago about how my cadenzas ruined Gershwin's masterpiece. My whole thing, again, is that I consider it a starting point for where Gershwin was trying to go. Maybe my cadenzas weren't good. I can take that. But I don't agree with the idea that because something is written in the score, it has to be taken at face value, that it's sacrosanct —especially when it comes to taking improvisational liberties with cadenzas, which was an integral part of European music until the 19th century. Some people might find it offputting for Stefano Bollani, who is a fine pianist, to do that. I liked it.

3. Geri Allen-Mary Lou Williams Collective

"Gemini"

(*Zodiac Suite Revisited*, Mary). Allen, piano; Buster Williams, bass; Billy Hart, drums; Mary Lou Williams, composer. Recorded in 2003.

BEFORE: [*Two bars in*] That's "Gemini," Mary Lou Williams. It's Geri Allen playing it. That's the record that she did of the entire *Zodiac*. I know that record very well. Let's listen, because I haven't heard it in a little bit.

AFTER: I'll add Geri Allen to the list of pianists—or musicians, regardless of instrument—whose playing is original from having such command of the foundations of the language. With the language at your fingertips like that, there's so much you can do. I mean, there's not one Geri Allen record where I'm like, "Oh, she's trying to be original." It's just her, and it's so beautiful. Geri was the crème de la crème.

When I heard this Mary Lou Williams album years ago, Geri was working with Father Peter O'Brien, who was Mary Lou's manager. I heard this group play some of this music at Birdland, with Andrew Cyrille, Reggie Workman, and Oliver Lake.

That's a different entity. This album is *Zodiac Suite Revisited* from 2003, with Buster Williams and Billy Hart, some time before the group you referenced, which recorded around 2010 for Intakt. Oh! I was thinking, "I know this is Geri, but it sounds a little different." I don't know this record. I know Buster Williams was one of Mary Lou's favorite bassists.

"Gemini" is a very structural piece in that you have an established Theme A,

we'll call it, those eight quarter notes. Then there's a very brief interlude before it goes into this boogie-woogie figure, which is open—basically a C boogie-woogie. It's interesting to hear Geri play at this tempo; Mary Lou would play it a bit faster. But I like the tempo that Geri chose, really settling into it. Then it recapitulates to the beginning, da capo, whatever you want to call it. Then there's a coda at the end that Geri played more abstractly, but included it in there.

4. Sir Roland Hanna

"Elvira Madigan, Concerto No. 21 in C Major K467"

(*Apres un Reve*, Venus). Hanna, piano; Ron Carter, bass; Grady Tate, drums; Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, composer. Recorded in 2002.

BEFORE: Mozart. That's Roland Hanna with Grady Tate and Ron Carter.

AFTER: That's a great album. Roland Hanna was incredibly lyrical, wonderful sound, tone quality, knew how to dig in and get into the groove, knew how to really allow the piano to sing. Mozart's melody is very strong, and you expand upon that very strong theme. There's not much you have to add to it except your own sound and approach. With musicians like Hanna, Ron Carter and Grady Tate, the possibilities are endless. It always has to be done in taste. It's a master class in that kind of playing.

Do you think Mozart could have envisioned a bass solo like Ron Carter's on this?
It's fascinating to think about Mozart or anyone who lived more than 200 years ago somehow being transplanted into this time period, and hearing the music we're playing and how we're playing it. Everyone has their idea how it sounded, but nobody *knows* how it sounded. People say, "Bach has to be done like this, and this is the performance practice." I'm pretty convinced it's nothing like we think it is. Certain elements probably are there. But if Bach actually could play his own language in 2022, I think people would be surprised at his flexibility—and also the fact that he was a ridiculous improviser.

5. Muhal Richard Abrams

"Afrisong"

(*Afrisong*, Whynot). Abrams, piano, composer. Recorded in 1974.

BEFORE: Just by the groove that's being played, I think this pianist is very familiar with the music of the African diaspora. Abdullah Ibrahim?

It's an American pianist, a bit older than Ibrahim, but not that much.
Keep playing. I know I'm probably wrong, but I'll throw it out there: Andrew Hill?

No, but you're warm.
Is this person alive?

Unfortunately, no.

AFTER: Is it Muhal Richard Abrams? I never heard this. It's a certain kind of language, almost like Earl Hines—very angular, but poetic at the same time. It's a very joyous song. I really like it. I don't know the specific groove or rhythm—I'd have to ask Etienne Charles—but my

Use this QR code to check out Zoom session video from the Before & After listening sessions. Accessible to *JazzTimes* members only; if you're interested in membership, go to jazztimes.com/memberships.

MARIA JARZYNA

> ***"People say, 'Bach has to be done like this.' I'm convinced it's nothing like we think it is."***

immediate impression was someone who understands the diaspora. That's why I first thought of Abdullah Ibrahim, who's from South Africa.

You played Muhal's "Two Over One" on the *Mesmerism* album. I wondered whether you had any thoughts on his music.
Honestly, I'm still learning quite a bit. AACM came to me quite late. Actually, when Cécile got her first Grammy, I was sitting next to Marcus Miller at lunch or dinner. It was a weird scene; Johnny Depp was behind us and everyone was trying to get a picture. But Marcus was talking about the AACM. I told him, "I'm not super-familiar," and he gave me some recommendations. I'd heard of some of the AACM members, but hadn't listened to much of that music. Now, especially through playing and talking with Tyshawn, I've dug deeper into it. Aesthetically, it's hard for me to grasp some things. Muhal definitely for me is much more accessible.

6. Keith Jarrett

"Part III"

(*Budapest Concert*, ECM). Jarrett, piano, composer. Recorded in 2016.

BEFORE: I just listened to this, like, two weeks ago. I don't know the precise movement because they're all titled Part 1, Part 2. Is it from the *Bordeaux Concert*?

No, this is the *Budapest Concert*.
It sounded very similar.

Well, both are from 2016.
Talk about an improviser of the highest order. I've been playing a bit of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and I go to Keith's recording sometimes to see how he approaches it. Also his Shostakovich. He's so special in terms of taking anything and really owning it—and certainly in his free improvisations. It's astounding how influential Keith Jarrett has been in the jazz piano lexicon in the last 50 years. He's on the same level as Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea. I joke to some of my colleagues about my admiration and adoration for these great pianists, but my absolute disdain for the cult following that they... Herbie, Chick, Brad Mehldau are the only people they listen to. I couldn't imagine listening to this music as a 16-year-old getting into jazz and being like, "Yeah, I want to play like that." I feel you have to be a mature listener to listen to these people without being so influenced by it that you want to imitate them, and then you have no other context of how music is created. It's as if your introduction to jazz is listening to the *Plugged Nickel* recordings. Now that I've hopefully grown a bit over the last 20 years, it's much easier to listen to basically the entire catalog of Miles Davis—and that quintet especially—in terms of understanding the references, how they're thinking and interacting with each other.

What do you think of Keith Jarrett's later work vis-a-vis the earlier records?
I think there's much more abstraction later on. I quite enjoy it. But one of my favorite Keith Jarrett albums is that solo album from around 2000 where he played "My Irish Rose," which is very simple and contemplative. When I hear this other side, I'm very intrigued, like, "Wow, how did he come up with that?"

7. Duke Ellington

"So"

(*Piano in the Foreground*, Columbia). Ellington, piano, composer; Aaron Bell, bass; Sam Woodyard, drums. Recorded in 1961.

BEFORE: [*Immediately*] Ellington. It's one of those trio recordings he did in the '50s, I want to say. Definitely Sam Woodyard on drums. I don't know who's on bass because he used a few different bassists. Is it from *Piano in the Foreground*? The sound is so identifiable. It's almost alien. Ellington's approach to piano was like nobody else. Sometimes you have to listen to few measures to get a grasp on the musician. With Ellington, one note. Something about his tone and approach. Very percussive ... I'm trying to find words to describe when I hear Ellington. Very dignified music. Exciting. ***JT***

Read the rest of Aaron Diehl's Before & After session, including comments on music by Marcus Roberts, John Lewis, Hank Jones, and Dave Bryant, at jazztimes.com.

Brian Auger at the controls

Brian Auger

The U.K.'s designated Hammond man is still melting minds today

BY A.D. AMOROSI

One of the most generous aspects of interviewing British-born Hammond B-3 organist and electric pianist Brian Auger—the toast of Swinging London's soul-jazz scene and a musician who played with Tony Williams, Jimi Hendrix, John McLaughlin, Sonny Boy Williamson, and more—is that you need not refer to his records to hear what they sound like. Auger does it all for you in real time by impersonating the wheeze and whirr of his Hammond, to say nothing of every other thwack of a drum or thrum of a bassline. Loudly.

To that cacophony, Auger—during what turned out to be one of the most pleasurable two hours of this journalist's career—often added brash laughter while offering a bird's-eye tour of musical London in the mid-'60s, while reminding me of what led him to become one of that moment's biggest hitmakers (his band the Trinity with vocalist Julie Driscoll struck it big with 1968's "This Wheel's on Fire," penned by Bob Dylan and Rick Danko).

Phrases such as "And then the Hammond came in and *rrrrrargh*" and "I had this solo that went *beedleldeledee*" were common throughout Auger's conversation, executed in a musical, Brit-accented lilt from his home-away-from-home in Los Angeles. When I mentioned to him that I'm from Philadelphia, he rattled off names of Philly organists—Jimmy Smith, "Groove" Holmes, Jimmy McGriff—before yelling, "Splendid!"

Of course, you'll have to make do with the recorded versions of those sounds, some of which appear on the newly released box set *Far Horizons* (Soul Bank), collecting Auger's early work with Driscoll and the Trinity. That collection is just the beginning of a series of boxes scheduled well into 2023 that includes *Complete Oblivion*, which spotlights his fusion-y Oblivion Express, and *Auger Incorporated*, which includes rare and unreleased material from the jazzy Brian Auger Piano Trio and the R&B-oriented Steampacket. On top of that, several *Live Oblivion* volumes and a DJ/producer remix album of Auger material with jazzheads such as Kenny Dope and King Britt will follow.

> ***"I took over Georgie Fame's three gigs a night on M-1 organ, one step up from the funeral-parlor model."***

"The organ chose me, in a roundabout way," said Auger, who got into jazz as a child listening to *The Jazz Hour* on the American Armed Forces Network Germany and began playing piano in his teens at British clubs like Ronnie Scott's. "From Ronnie's—a more traditional jazz club—I could walk a few feet and be at the Flamingo, where R&B was going on and people could dance. There were also ladies and gentlemen there from Jamaica, so *that* music was part of the scene. Anyway, the brothers who owned the Flamingo—one big guy who'd stand outside and bellow, 'Jazz till 5:30 a.m., guaranteed to wake you,' and one littler brother—had [organist] Georgie Fame playing there on the regular. Until he went on vacation, fell asleep on the beach, got sunstroke, and had to stay in the hospital. Se the brothers asked me a favor: to take over Fame's three gigs a night on M-1 organ, one step up from the funeral-parlor model. At the same time I'm playing piano down the road at The Roaring Twenties, another club. They paid my cab fare to go back and forth. It was a magnificent introduction to playing jazz organ in a live setting. The M-1? You could panic just looking at it, what with its switches and dials. Still, I think I mastered it within 45 minutes of playing the beast."

The next thing you know, living as he did then in the west London neigborhood of Shepherd's Bush and strolling through its outdoor marketplace, Auger came to a record store with an outdoor speaker. Roaring through the midday air was Jimmy Smith's then-new B-3 jamming *Back at the*

ELDE STEWART

Afro sure: Auger with famed partner Julie Driscoll (L) in 1968

Chicken Shack on Blue Note. "Wrap that up!" yells Auger. "I was completely hooked."

Even though Auger had already won awards for "New Star" and "Jazz Piano" in 1964's *Melody Maker* readers' poll, he began including R&B and blues in his sound as part of the Brian Auger Trinity (then including John McLaughlin). Then he abandoned piano altogether for the B-3 on a 1968 album with Sonny Boy Williamson, *Don't Send Me No Flowers*, featuring saxophonists Joe Harriott and Alan Skidmore, and guitarist Jimmy Page. "Suddenly there were songs I was writing for the organ that would've sounded stupid on the piano," he said. "And vice versa. It just happened that by then, I was writing more for the B-3."

Auger talked about how the harmonic rush of the Hammond offered a perfect vibe for composing as well as for soloing, a sound he said was "like Jimmy Smith, with this sort of bravado and swing."

By the time he started working with Julie Driscoll (an improvisational singer who'd initially been part of Auger's Steampacket revue/ensemble with fellow vocalists Long John Baldry and Rod Stewart) on the music in the *Far Horizons* box, psychedelicized rock had infiltrated the world of Auger and the Trinity. Their 1967 debut *Open* was a free, funky mix of slimy swamp blues, hard-jamming jazz, and fuzz-toned exotica on instrumentals such as "Isola Nate"—and that was *before* getting to Driscoll's clarion-clear and emotive freak-folkishness on several Auger originals, as well as Donovan's "Season of the Witch."

Of incorporating Driscoll's sound into his own at that time, Auger recalled how the British female vocalist "sung a lot of Aretha Franklin then, and was in love with Nina Simone. She would really let fly. Really felt the pathos and emotion in every lyric. I always picked people who sang and played with gusto, and what Julie, the Trinity, and I did really took off like a rocket."

Reputations were sealed on those first recordings. Auger, Driscoll, and the Trinity expanded their minds and their progressive vision with the double album *Streetnoise*, which features everything from art rock to wonky renditions of "Flesh Failures (Let the Sunshine In)" from the bare-assed musical *Hair*, a stirringly emotional take on Laura Nyro's "Save the Country," and a molten B-3 burner from Auger, "Indian Rope Man," that could still melt your ears from all of its dynamics, soul, and innovation.

The flame that Auger and Driscoll kindled together didn't last long after that, as the vocalist went on to work with other jazz leaders such as her future husband Keith Tippett and Carla Bley, and the organist subsequently dove into the progressive-jazz fusion of Oblivion Express. "But it burned bright. Really bright," Auger said. "I'd like to think that everything from the Soul Bank boxes to whatever new music I'm doing now all contains that flame." ***JT***

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

The Steampacket: *Rock Generation, Volume 6: The Steampacket (Or the First Supergroup)*
(recorded in 1965, released 1970, BYG)

Julie Driscoll/Brian Auger & the Trinity: *Streetnoise*
(Atco, 1969)

Brian Auger's Oblivion Express: *A Better Land*
(RCA, 1971)

Passport and Brian Auger, Johnny Griffin, Alexis Korner, Volker Kriegel, Pete York: *Doldinger Jubilee Concert*
(Atlantic Germany, 1974)

Lenny White: *Big City*
(Nemperor, 1977)

Billy Cobham & Novecento: *Drum n Voice Vol. 3*
(Soul Trade, 2010)

The Brian Auger Piano Trio: *Full Circle Live at Bogies*
(Freestyle, 2018)

The Year in Review 2022:

TOP 50 CRITICS' PICKS

We calculated our top 40 new releases and top 10 historical/reissue recordings of 2022 based on year-end lists by our writers. They were asked to choose the 10 best new releases and five best historical titles—i.e., albums and box sets consisting primarily of music recorded 10 or more years ago.
To see each voter's ballot, visit JazzTimes.com.
Albums and box sets released between Nov. 12, 2021 and Nov. 11, 2022 were eligible. Some discs may have slipped through the cracks, however, as official release dates shifted or weren't available.

BLURBS BY DAN BILAWSKY, PHILIP BOOTH, SHAUN BRADY, THOMAS CONRAD, MORGAN ENOS, STEVE GREENLEE, MARTIN JOHNSON, ALLEN MORRISON, MAC RANDALL, BRITT ROBSON, MIKE SHANLEY, MARK STRYKER, JEFF TAMARKIN, CHRIS J. WALKER, AND MICHAEL J. WEST

IMMANUEL WILKINS

1. Immanuel Wilkins
The 7th Hand (Blue Note)

ROG WALKER

Immanuel Wilkins' *Omega* was one of the most decorated jazz albums of 2022. When a debut recording hits the street with that kind of impact, it creates high expectations for the follow-up. *The 7th Hand* exceeds those expectations. Wilkins' extraordinary talent transcends technical virtuosity on alto saxophone. Somehow, at the age of 24, he is an artist of profound spiritual depth. *The 7th Hand* is a step beyond *Omega* because it moves from social and historical concerns (important as they are) to universal truths of human striving and aspiration. It is a suite in seven parts. The first six constitute a diverse, powerful statement. Because Wilkins and his pianist Micah Thomas are wildly creative improvisers, those first six movements, if they stood alone, would comprise a Top Ten album. But the seventh movement, "Lift," makes *The 7th Hand* something apart. It is 26 minutes of hell and heaven in which the four members of Wilkins' quartet, in his words, "become vessels." This state of selflessness leads to extremes of shattering crisis and liberating catharsis. Such a testament could only achieve its final fulfillment by risking everything and passing through fire. With "Lift" as culmination, *The 7th Hand* becomes overwhelming. **T.C.**

2. Tyshawn Sorey Trio *Mesmerism* (Yeros7)

What happens when a musician renowned for his composing decides to do a "standards" album? When that musician is drummer Tyshawn Sorey, you get a captivating blend of graceful revelry and subtly conceptual improvisation. Sorey's choices of material (from "Autumn Leaves" to Muhal Richard Abrams, Paul Motian, and Horace Silver) and cohorts (pianist Aaron Diehl, bassist Matt Brewer) reveal clues as to how he stays alert amid deep relaxation. We have no choice but to follow suit. **B.R.**

3. Billy Drummond & Freedom of Ideas *Valse Sinistre* (Cellar)

For his first album as a leader in 26 years, the drummer's drummer enlists saxophonist Dayna Stephens, pianist Micah Thomas, and bassist Dezron Douglas for adventurous music ranging from an urgent, bracing take on Jackie McLean's "Little Melonae" to a haunting version of the ballad "Laura." Drummond aptly salutes a pair of musical heroes on his "Changes for Trane & Monk" and turns in a soprano-led version of Grachan Moncur's twisty, rarely played "Frankenstein." **P.B.**

4. Cécile McLorin Salvant *Ghost Song* (Nonesuch)

Cécile McLorin Salvant has diligently redefined the popular concept of a jazz singer, and *Ghost Songs* is her most spectacular expansion yet. She goes beyond genre both in her spectacular cover of Kate Bush's "Wuthering Heights" and in her range of source material on other tracks, which feature field hollers, youth choirs, solo piano, and a cappella vocals. With McLorin Salvant, jazz singing has gone from an exercise in wistful nostalgia to an investigation of the polyglot future. **M.J.**

5. Mary Halvorson *Amaryllis* (Nonesuch)

With each release, Mary Halvorson's vision expands while her focus becomes ever more precise. Her latest sprawls over two separate discs: companion piece *Belladonna* features the Mivos String Quartet, while *Amaryllis* combines that ensemble with an incredible new sextet. A singular guitarist, Halvorson weaves era-spanning jazz traditions in with corrosive rock, avant-funk, and chamber writing, all reflected through a funhouse mirror warp. What's most remarkable about *Amaryllis* is the way that voice is embodied through the full ensemble. **S.B.**

6. Redman Mehldau McBride Blade *LongGone* (Nonesuch)

LongGone ultimately isn't about the dexterity of the individual. Like the two previous efforts by this esteemed quartet, it's a textbook display of what happens when a group of musicians—each a leader in his own right—understand and trust one another enough to let the music go where it must. **J.T.**

7. Jakob Bro/Joe Lovano *Once Around the Room: A Tribute to Paul Motian* (ECM)

Convening an esteemed assortment of their fellow Paul Motian associates, guitarist Jakob Bro and saxophonist Joe Lovano make their co-led debut with a salute to the late drummer/composer. Moody and, at times, melodious, the predominantly original program takes cues from the honoree's fluid mindset while acknowledging his penchant for unusual configurations with a septet boasting three bassists and two drummers. **D.B.**

8. Charles Lloyd *Trios: Chapel* (Blue Note)

Charles Lloyd, at 84, is still a seeker. He has conceived a new ensemble format, the drummerless trio, and expressed it in three personnel configurations on three new recordings. All are among the top jazz albums of 2022. *Chapel* is favored here because it beautifully juxtaposes two dissimilar languages of lyricism (Lloyd's and Bill Frisell's), and because Thomas Morgan, who used to be the best young bass player in jazz, is now the best bass player, period. **T.C.**

9. Wadada Leo Smith, Jack DeJohnette & Vijay Iyer *A Love Sonnet for Billie Holiday* (TUM)

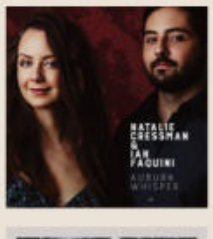
Set aside the title; this music has little to do with the legendary vocalist. What we have here instead lives on the highest plane of interplay and intuition while balancing structure with freedom. Trumpeter Smith has been doing his life's greatest (and most prolific) work in his golden years, and this superior outing teams him with two kindred master craftsmen, keyboardist Iyer and drummer DeJohnette. Compelling and surprising from start to finish. **S.G.**

10. Julian Lage *View with a Room* (Blue Note)

Leading a trio joined on seven tracks by similarly restless guitar explorer Bill Frisell, Lage applies his gorgeous tone, impeccable rhythmic

17. Melody Gardot and Philippe Powell *Entre eux Deux* (Decca)

18. Wadada Leo Smith *The Emerald Duets* (TUM)



19. Natalie Cressman & Ian Faquini *Auburn Whisper* (GroundUP)

20. The Bad Plus *The Bad Plus* (Edition)

21. Ches Smith *Interpret It Well* (Pyroclastic)

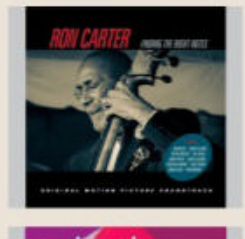
22. Myra Melford's Fire and Water Quintet *For the Love of Fire and Water* (RogueArt)

23. Danilo Pérez Featuring the Global Messengers *Crisálida* (Mack Avenue)

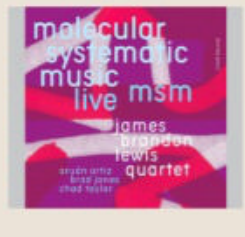
24. John Scofield *John Scofield* (ECM)

25. Marta Sanchez *SAAM (Spanish American Art Museum)* (Whirlwind)

26. Miguel Zenón *Música de las Américas* (Miel)



27. Ron Carter *Finding the Right Notes* (In & Out)



28. James Brandon Lewis Quartet *MSM Molecular Systematic Music Live* (Intakt)

feel, and intriguing note choices to a set of original compositions drawing from jazz, blues, rock, and Americana. The shimmering sounds and interplay with bassist Jorge Roeder and drummer Dave King (the Bad Plus) grow more entrancing with each listen. The slow-burning "Echo" and churning, busy "Word for Word" are among many standout tracks. **P.B.**

11. JD Allen *Americana* Vol. 2 (Savant)

lIt's all there in JD Allen's profound opening salvo on "Up South." His tenor saxophone sound, as chiseled as John Henry, moans with the cry of the blues: the manifestation of a sweeping aesthetic, contemporary yet rooted in the jazz tradition and the cultural memory of the Great Migration that brought Allen's family to Detroit. Charlie Hunter, Gregg August, and Rudy Royston lay down sturdy grooves. Allen communes with the ancestors, the blues their common language. **M.S.**

12. Dave Stryker *As We Are* (Strikezone)

On which, 34 albums into his career, the still-underappreciated guitarist goes all chamber-jazz on us, with help from pianist Julian Shore, bassist John Patitucci, drummer Brian Blade, and a string quartet led by violinist Sara Caswell. The results—especially on a mesmerizing version of Nick Drake's "River Man"—redefine the adjectives "classy" and "gorgeous." **M.R.**

13. Terri Lyne Carrington *New Standards Vol. 1* (Candid)

What's that they say about women having to work twice as hard? For the conceit of *New Standards*—compositions by women from all across the jazz spectrum—to fly, the material couldn't be any less than stellar. It delivers in spades. But so do Carrington, her core quintet, and the myriad special guests who give transcendent treatments to works by Gretchen Parlato, Brandee Younger, Abbey Lincoln, and Marilyn Crispell. It's just volume 1, thank God. **M.J.W.**

14. Christian McBride & Inside Straight *Live at the Village Vanguard* (Mack Avenue)

The personification of high-intensity, straight-ahead postbop, no group in jazz swings harder, thanks to the elite rhythm section of McBride, Peter Martin on piano and Carl Allen on drums. This set, recorded in 2014 during the same two-week engagement as the Grammy-winning *Christian McBride Trio Live at the Village Vanguard*, showcases originals by three members and features astounding solos by McBride, Warren Wolf on vibes, and Steve Wilson on alto and soprano. Swing lives. **A.M.**

15. Samara Joy *Linger Awhile* (Verve)

Samara Joy's sophomore album authenticates the meteoric 22-year-old singer's prowess and seemingly natural style that prompts associations with Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, and Dinah Washington. Her lush, unpretentious alto doesn't require a great song to excel, but her warmth, sensitivity, and stalwart band accompaniment take command for well-known standards "Guess Who I Saw Today," "Misty," "I'm Confessin' (That I Love You)" and "'Round Midnight." **C.J.W.**

16. Miles Okazaki *Thisness* (Pi)

For *Thisness* Miles Okazaki utilized the Surrealist game Exquisite Corpse, in which the final unfolded "picture" creates a unique image with several unrelated sections. Here, musical transitions come both radically and gradually; a loose, flowing passage gives way to a 4/4 groove or Matt Mitchell wedges a keyboard melody in a place where it didn't seem possible. Like his visual inspiration, Okazaki's Charlie Christian model Gibson ES-175 guitar unleashes a tapestry of ideas that surprise and captivate. **M.S.**

29. Makaya McCraven *In These Times* (International Anthem)

30. Yellowjackets *Parallel Motion* (Mack Avenue)

31. Joel Ross *The Parable of the Poet* (Blue Note)

32. Keith Jarrett *Bordeaux Concert* (ECM)

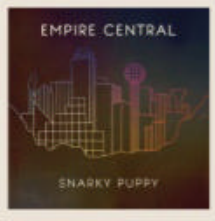
33. Eliane Elias *Quietude* (Candid)

34. Jon Irabagon *Rising Sun* (Irabbagast)

35. Luke Stewart's Silt Trio *The Bottom* (Cuneiform)

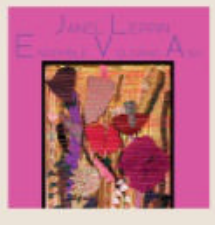
36. Ivo Perelman/Matthew Shipp *Fruition* (ESP-Disk')

37. The Headhunters *Speakers in the House* (Ropeadope)



38. Snarky Puppy *Empire Central* (GroundUP)

39. DOMi & JD Beck *NOT TiGHT* (Blue Note)



40. Janel Leppin *Ensemble Volcanic Ash* (Cuneiform)

TOP 10 HISTORICAL RELEASES

1. Charles Mingus

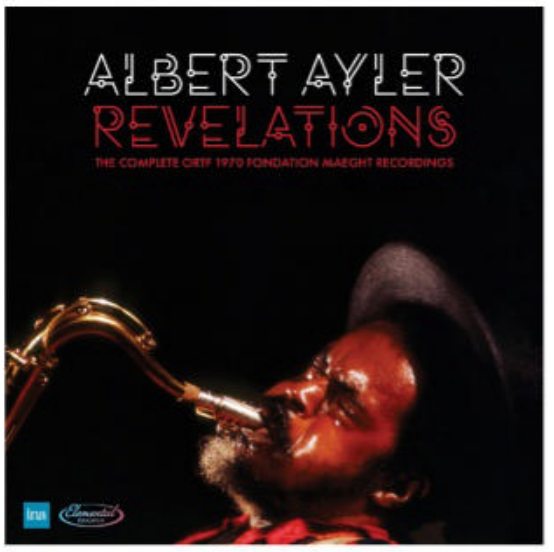
The Lost Album from Ronnie Scott's
(Resonance)

HANS HARZHEIM

How appropriate that for his centennial year, the big man should come out on the top of our annual poll. Take one listen to this sprawling 1972 live set and you'll know it's the right call; Mingus' whole sextet (with Charles McPherson, Roy Brooks, Bobby Jones, John Foster, and Jon Faddis) is an unstoppable force. That Columbia Records recorded the shows and never released a second beggars belief. Be glad yet again that we live in the age of Resonance. **M.R.**

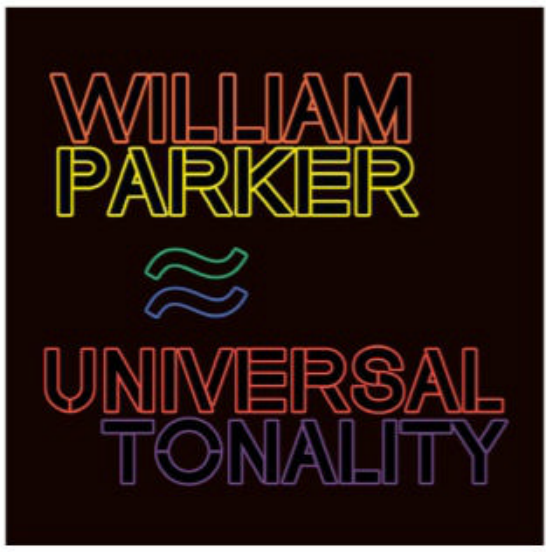
2. Cecil Taylor *The Complete, Legendary, Live Return Concert at the Town Hall NYC, November 4, 1973* (Oblivion)
"Autumn/Parade," a previously unreleased 88-minute Taylor quartet performance, would be thrilling enough on its own. But it also happens to be just part of a legendary concert in the free-jazz great's career—his triumphant return to New York after years in Europe and the Midwest. Only a third of that performance has ever been issued before (and that third is quite rare), making the sublimely remastered *Return Concert* a monumental affair. **M.J.W.**

3. Albert Ayler *Revelations: The Complete ORTF 1970 Fondations Maeght Recordings* (Resonance)
To hear Albert Ayler is to behold genius without being beaten over the head by it; he



may have been a titanic figure, but his music never gives you the impression of an *arteest*. The four-CD live *Revelations* is an excellent gateway into Ayler's universe; even when compositions like "Birth of Mirth" grow unwieldy, the music is charged with imagination, play, and superlative love. **M.E.**

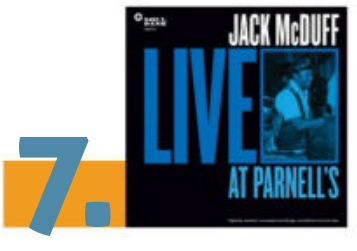
4. William Parker *Universal Tonality* (Centering/AUM Fidelity)
Parker has become the treasured godfather of "avant-garde jazz" specifically for phenomenal events like this December 2002 concert, a two-hour journey involving 17 musicians. The 31-minute "Cloud Texture (Death Has Died Today)," rich with Asian strings and African American horns, narrated from a Native American perspective via Leena Conquest's globally soulful

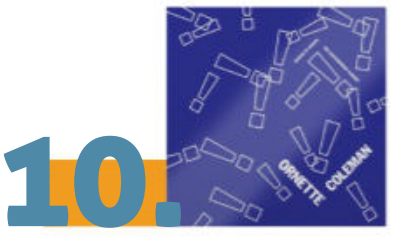


talk-song, befriends chaos in conversation with clarity. And five other songs, the shortest one 10:14, besiege, beseech, regale, relax, heal, hail, and shout for joy at the sheer blues of it all. **B.R.**

5. Miles Davis *The Bootleg Series Vol. 7: That's What Happened 1982-1985* (Columbia/Legacy)
Moving beyond the formative periods covered in the series' first six volumes (the

'50s-'70s), Vol. 7 lands on the early '80s, when Miles was creating the music that would become the albums *Star People, Decoy* and *You're Under Arrest*. As always, he was looking for something new and, surrounded by ace players, he proves that he's still pointing the way for others to follow. **J.T.**





6. Ella Fitzgerald *Ella at the Hollywood Bowl: The Irving Berlin Songbook* (Verve/UMe)
7. Jack McDuff *Live at Parnell's* (Soul Bank)
8. Vince Guaraldi *A Charlie Brown Christmas: Deluxe Edition* (Craft/Concord)
9. Hasaan Ibn Ali *Retrospect in Retirement of Delay: The Solo Recordings* (Omnivore)
10. Ornette Coleman *Genesis of Genius: The Contemporary Albums* (Craft/Concord)

L to R: Eric Revis, John Escreet, and Damion Reid

TERESA LEE

Shifting to Third

Pianist JOHN ESCREET steps out with a trio for the first time

By Morgan Enos

More than a decade after issuing his debut LP, John Escreet *finally* felt prepared for a rite of passage: recording his first trio album.

On this year's *Seismic Shift*—unlike on his past six offerings as a leader—there wasn't a guitar, saxophone or trumpet to accompany Escreet. Instead, the English pianist was solely bolstered by Eric Revis' woody, booming upright bass and the supple snap of Damion Reid's drums. Just like Ahmad Jamal on *At the Pershing*, Bill Evans on *Sunday at the Village Vanguard*, and Duke Ellington on *Money Jungle*, there was nowhere in the soundfield for Escreet to hide.

Not that he would need to: several of his key collaborators agree that he could have done this earlier.

"I would have argued that John was ready a long time ago for a trio record," says saxophonist David Binney, who accompanied Escreet on his first five records as a leader and put him in his bands. "John has had the goods for a long time," says drummer Antonio Sánchez, his longtime employer as part of his band, Migration. "This is one of those moments where you have to just do it," Reid adds. "Who knows how long he would have felt ready? But he seems like he's comfortable playing with me, and we have a connection musically."

Let's hear it from the man himself: What compelled him to wait until now?

"It was an honest and accurate reflection of what was happening in my musical life at that moment in time," he tells *JazzTimes* plainly. "Which would happen to be me delving into a trio format with Eric Revis and Damion Reid." But a tossed-off insight about an older album provides even more insight into what makes this guy tick: "I will not record some s—t before it's ready. I refuse. I will not do it."

This declaration speaks to both Escreet's smoldering intensity—which is bracing even through a Zoom window—and his commendable restraint as an artist.

"That's very respectable and mature to wait until you have something to say," Sánchez notes. "If you're a good jazz musician, it's so easy to get a trio together, go into the studio, and play some tunes. A lot of people do that, and I think it dilutes the art form."

Because of Escreet's needle-sharp intent, top-tier rhythm section, and inspired compositions and improvisations, *Seismic Shift* doesn't dilute *anything* one iota. Rather, it's a terrific entry in the pantheon of luminous, challenging jazz-piano-trio albums.

MANCHESTER TO MANHATTAN

Not bad for an artist who emerged from a nonmusical family. Escreet was born in 1984 in Doncaster, England. Despite not being musically inclined, his parents were supportive; they enrolled him in piano lessons when he was four. Early

TERESA LEE

on, televised pop acts with live musicians—especially those with jazz players—stimulated his imagination. When he was 14, he enrolled in Chetham's School of Music in Manchester.

"It was a classical music school; it was hardcore training," Escreet describes. "I was always serious about what I was doing, but there were little eight- and nine-year-old prodigies running around, just tearing up Rachmaninoff concertos, for example."

Naturally—given his temperament—he didn't buckle under that pressure, but thrived on it; today, he calls his Chetham's experience "a great environment to be in during a very important time in my life." He graduated from the school at 18, and studied as an undergrad at the Royal Academy of Music in London for four years.

Which pianists got Escreet going early on, influence-wise?

"I've always been into the obvious, famous piano players, but also into the slightly more adventurous and obscure ones who can *really* get my attention," he says, citing Paul Bley, Cecil Taylor, and Andrew Hill, as well as Stanley Cowell, a lesser-known figure who would go on to loom large in *Seismic Shift*. From the contemporary crop, Escreet shouts out Jason Moran, Craig Taborn, and the late Geri Allen.

In 2006, a 22-year-old Escreet emigrated to New York and began a two-year master's program at the Manhattan School of Music. Two years later, he graduated and released his debut album as a leader, *Consequences*, featuring Binney, bassist Matt Brewer, and two top-flight innovators at the beginning of their ascents: trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire and drummer Tyshawn Sorey.

In his early years, Escreet performed with Sorey in a couple of his early bands: one a quartet with saxophonist Aaron Stewart and cornetist Taylor Ho Bynum, the other a quintet featuring saxophonist Loren Stillman, guitarist Todd Neufield, and bassist Christopher Tordini, which went on to record Sorey's 2011 album *Oblique*.

"I think [the *Consequences* tour] was Ambrose's first time in Europe, and Tyshawn in that era … it was just hysterical," Binney says. "And seeing John's hometown … it's just such another world."

Escreet's senior by more than 20 years and an already-known quantity on the New York scene, Binney took the pianist under his wing at the outset of his career and got him his first record deal.

Early on, he says, Escreet was "kind of straight-ahead, and kind of anti-anything that wasn't straight-ahead. We used to have discussions about that. I tried to open him up a little bit into other things, and he *did* open up into other things… I just tried to help him out, because I liked him and thought he had something to offer."

The pianist followed up *Consequences* with 2010's *Don't Fight the Inevitable*, for Binney's label, Mythology Records. That album featured the same group, but with Nasheet Waits in lieu of Sorey. "I remember him having a lot of vitality in his playing," Waits says about Escreet. "He was always alert, astute… I can hear echoes of Jason [Moran] in his playing, because he spent quite a bit of time studying with him." He branched out stylistically with his next Mythology offering, *The Age We Live In*, featuring Binney, guitarist Wayne Krantz, and drummer Marcus Gilmore.

"That was a departure from the old band," Escreet says of that album, which *The Guardian* described as possessing "a jolting contemporary-funk feel peppered with Binney's twisting alto-sax melodies." "I kind of shifted, because I wanted to get into some other area of music that I was interested in."

Binney then helped Escreet get a record date for Criss Cross, which resulted in 2011's *Exception to the Rule*. Binney was back, with a reconstituted rhythm section: Eivind Opsvik on bass and Waits on drums. "Those sessions [for Criss Cross] are kind of a quick, one-day thing," Escreet says. "[Nasheet] knew a lot of the book, and a lot of the music… therefore, minimal preparation was needed.

"Not to be lazy," Escreet clarifies. "It's just that I wanted to capture something that was ongoing and currently happening."

> **"I was always serious [in school], but there were little eight-year-old prodigies tearing up Rachmaninoff concertos."**

ENTER THE WHIRLWIND

Escreet had known bassist and Whirlwind Records founder Michael Janisch since he was 19 or 20; that connection led to 2013's *Sabotage and Celebration*, his first for the label. His final record with Binney as an accompanist to date, it found the pair accompanied by Brewer, tenor saxophonist Chris Potter, and drummer Jim Black. That quintet had done some gigs together in November 2011; they could have recorded together then, but Escreet demurred. "I was like, 'Okay, this is good, but it's not ready to record yet,'" he says. They ended up nailing it in the studio the following year, during Hurricane Sandy time.

"I was into string writing," Escreet says of his creative mindset during that time. "Which was not featured so much on *The Age We Live In*, but *Sabotage and Celebration* starts out with that orchestral string piece." All involved stretched out in the arranging and post-production processes: "It's all over the place," Escreet marvels. "It's an epic, wide-ranging album."

Following *Sabotage and Celebration* were two albums for Sunnyside Records: 2014's *Sound, Space and Structures* and 2016's *The Unknown*, both featuring saxophonist Evan Parker, bassist John Hébert, and drummer Tyshawn Sorey. "[Those two albums] go back to a trio I had with John Hébert and Tyshawn, about 10 years ago," he explains, with an addendum that's something of a refrain: "I didn't feel I was strong enough to record the trio at that time."

Augmented by Parker, the group recorded both Sunnyside albums in a purely improvised format. ("There's not a note of composed music on either of those albums," he adds.) He characterizes Parker as a "free-jazz icon," and the experience of recording with him "hugely significant for me."

Sound, Space and Structures divided those extemporaneous creations into "bite-sized chunks"; *The Unknown*, organized as a 45-minute part one and 29-minute part two, recorded on the same tour of the Netherlands, is more reflective of that quartet's live show.

Escreet followed that improvisational dyad with 2018's heavily electronic *Learn to Live*, his first (and to date, only) album for BRM Records. Joining him there were trumpeter Nicholas Payton, saxophonist Greg Osby, bassist Brewer, and two simultaneous drummers: Eric Harland and Justin Brown.

"I hate to use the word *fusion*, but it's definitely more in that zone," Escreet says, citing his use of Rhodes and Prophet synthesizer. "It couldn't be more different than the new one I just put out." He means *Seismic Shift*, which—like each of its predecessors—was simply an effort to document where he was at in his musical life.

BREAKING IT DOWN

Seismic Shift initiates with "Study No. 1." "As the very boring title suggests, it's a piano study," Escreet says dryly. "A slightly older piano study that I wrote, just to address some technical issues on the piano." He means the rhythmic dimensions of his left-hand playing—and the results are far from boring, but bracing and cerebral.

"Equipoise" is a piece by Stanley Cowell, a brilliant pianist, composer, and educator who only belatedly got his flowers despite performing with Max Roach, Charles Tolliver, Art Pepper, Bobby Hutcherson, and other leading lights. "He's something of an underdog, and he only got his dues toward the end of his life," Escreet explains. He got acquainted with "Equipoise," one of Cowell's better-known compositions, via the version on Cowell's 1974 solo-piano record *Musa: Ancestral Streams*; after Cowell passed in 2020, Escreet communed with the album like never before.

"It really is kind of simple in some ways, but it gets straight to the heart of things," Escreet says of "Equipoise." "It's hard to describe; it's melodic, but it's soulful at the same time. It's not boxed in." When asked why a neophyte should know Cowell, he replies somewhat tersely: "If you're into the real s—t, check him out. If you're into the fake s—t, don't bother."

"Outward and Upward"—named after a phrase of encouragement Cowell himself once laid on him—is an ominous free improvisation that gathers momentum like a dustdevil; the following track, "RD," stands for "Revis/Damion."

"It was written specifically for those guys, for the first gig we had," Escreet explains of the bisected composition. "I was like: *Okay, I got a gig with these guys; let me write something for their characters and personalities*."

Escreet calls "Perpetual Love" "more of a melodic kind of tune with more discernible harmony, which is not always the case with my compositions. Not to sound cheesy, but there needs to be love and romanticism within the context of all the crazy s—that happens in the world," he says. "It's a nice dynamic to incorporate."

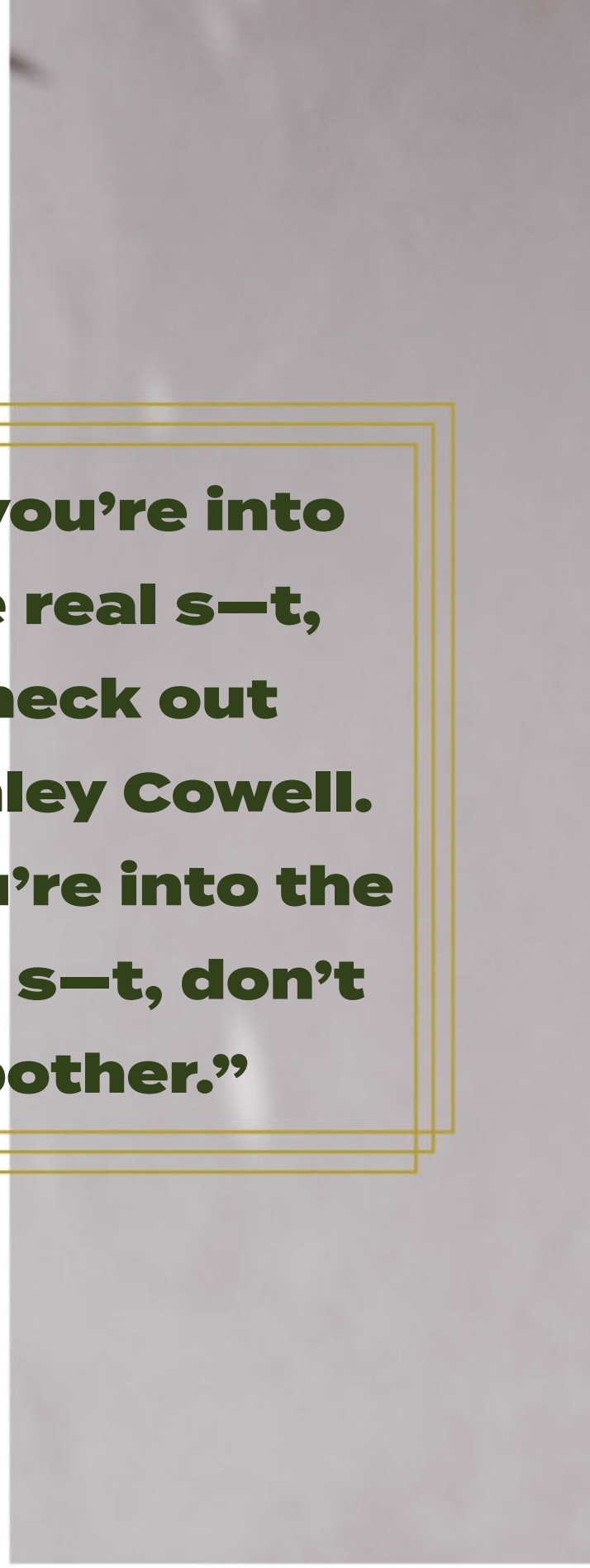
This harmonizes not only with the juxtaposed moods throughout *Seismic Shift*, but Escreet's entire m.o. as an artist. "Any music I present needs to be varied," he states in the album's press release. "There needs to be beauty alongside the wild moments, moments of tonality against moments of abstraction."

"Digital Tulips" sprang up as another one of Escreet's piano studies, like "Study No. 1."

"It's actually very difficult to play in terms of this kind of bassline, together with this crazy melody," he says of the breathtakingly teeming tune. But beneath the technical bravado, there's a relatively simple harmonic and rhythmic essence.

"It's all in 4/4; it's just a bunch of major chords, or sus chords," Escreet adds. "It's very difficult to execute, but once you take the time and effort to execute it, it doesn't sound brainy and complex."

Seismic Shift's title track had been kicking around for a few years with a different title. "It's a very loose tune, especially in the beginning," Escreet says. "It's kind of wide-open improvisationally, but it's built around these two chords. I wanted it to kind of build from nothing, and then build and build and build and build until it reaches this climax," he adds. "A wall of sound where everybody goes f—ing crazy."



"If you're into the real s—t, check out Stanley Cowell. If you're into the fake s—t, don't bother."

Escreet applies the title to several seismic shifts in his life, from the pandemic—which affected *everyone*, in one way or another—to his own relocation from New York to Los Angeles. Plus, "There's a lot of seismic activity in California," he notes. "When we get to the climax of the piece, it sounds like an earthquake—like the sky is falling and the ground is opening up."

At shy of two minutes, "Quick Reset" does exactly what it sets out to do; it allows listeners to catch their breath before the darkly unsettled finale, "The Water Is Tasting Worse." Longtime followers of Escreet might note that this tune appeared on an album more than a decade ago:

TERESA LEE

Exception to the Rule. "Because I was a much weaker player back in those days, I feel like we didn't get it," Escreet admits. "It's another technically difficult tune, but even though the head and composed material is technically challenging, the blowing [e.g., improvising] is not."

INTENSE INTENTION

Escreet, Revis, and Reid recorded *Seismic Shift* at Big City Recording Studios in Granada Hills—one of numberless high-quality studios in the L.A. area, but rare in the sense that it didn't have a "trash piano." "When it's a trio and it's so exposed," Escreet says, "the standard is different."

"The three of us together, I feel like it's unique," Reid reflects. "I don't think anyone would have thought the three of us would put a record out together, to be honest." This is because, in his telling, the music industry pigeonholes people, keeping them in well-worn lanes.

But it's difficult to imagine Escreet's next moves as being predictable or preprogrammed; that's never been his forte. His focus is too sharp. As he put it in the press release, "Any idea put forward, whether composed or improvised, needs to have clarity and purpose."

"He's always been intense; that's for sure," Binney says. "I liked that. I liked that in the musicality; he plays with an intention that's intense, and I dug that. I think that's part of why we get along musically, and even as friends."

Only someone like Escreet could make a dramatic creative swing like *Seismic Shift*—and not only make it believable, but memorable. Like the music, the horizon on the cover denotes time, memory, and experience cleaved in two, traumatically and exhilaratingly.

A confluence of drastic events, both personal and global, didn't destabilize Escreet's artistry. Rather, it opened a door to what he's been seeking all this time: aural starkness, a step into the spotlight, a pure triangulation. It's a shift he prepared for all his life. ***JT***

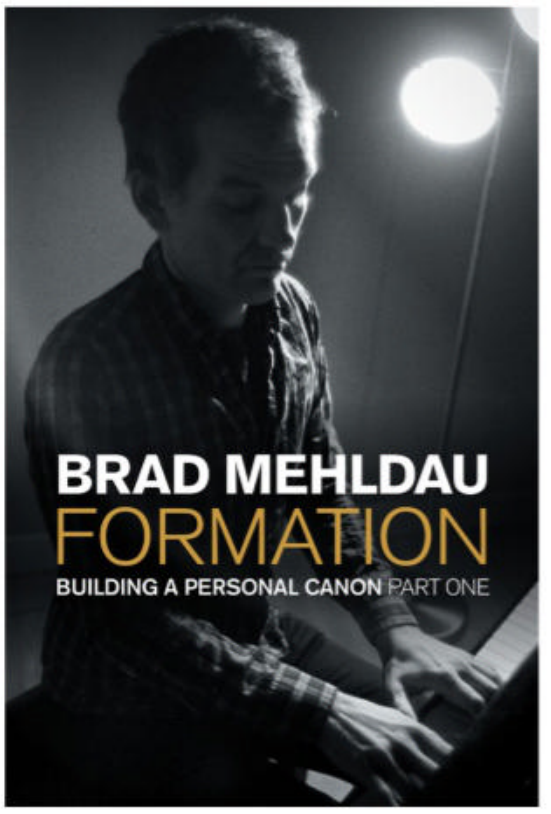
HALCYON DAYS

When BRAD MEHLDAU moved to New York in the late 1980s, he entered "jazz heaven," as he describes in his moving new book

By Brad Mehldau

ALAN NAHIGIAN

In Brad Mehldau's memoir Formation, *the pianist and composer recounts the events of his early years, ending in the mid-1990s. Deep philosophical musings alternate with discomforting tales of abuse, sexual confusion, and drug addiction. But for jazz fans, the most engaging passages will undoubtedly be those long sections where Mehldau writes in depth about music and musicians. Two such sections appear below. In the first, our author, still a teenager and newly arrived in New York from Connecticut, is finding his way in the club scene of the late '80s and learning some lessons about accompaniment.*



Excerpted from *Formation: Building a Personal Canon Part One* by Brad Mehldau (Equinox Publishing Ltd.). Copyright © Brad Mehldau 2023.

I had been playing piano in [saxophonist] Jesse Davis' group at Augie's and it was heaven—I felt like a cog in a wheel, comping behind him. He played so rhythmically strong and swinging, and my comping was improving every week, being up there with him. Comping is an indispensable part of being a jazz pianist, unless you only want to play your own music without any other soloists. Even then you should have a handle on it.

The experience with Jesse helped to ease an inferiority complex about comping I had brought to New York. It had started during my first gig at the 880 in Hartford, with [drummer/educator] Larry DiNatale. Larry told me two or three times: "You're really talented, but you'll never be a good comper." I wasn't then, at age 15. [Saxophonist] Joel Frahm was on the gig with us, and at least he didn't complain too much to me about how I comped behind him. I held onto Larry's words going forward as I arrived in New York, trying to figure out what he had meant, always trying to be good at comping, never really sure. In retrospect, I think that Larry's comment was not flippant. He was sensing something about my personality, and got me aware of how that could play out detrimentally in the music.

I had been trying to people-please as a comper, and my model no doubt came from the musico-social interactions I had in high school, where I would try to come over to someone's side through their music: metalhead? No problem, I'll talk to him about Judas Priest. Stevie Nicks devotee? We can hang out in her basement, and get dreamy together listening to Fleetwood Mac. It had worked well enough in a high-school social setting. But how did that dictum play out in the abstracted sociality of collective jazz improvisation?

I began to learn that instrumentalists and singers often didn't want or need a similar validation from the accompanist. Actually, most of the time, they preferred that you supply your steady support by staying clear of their path, not answering their every idea, but rather laying something down more locked into the bass and drums, even grid-like. If you are constantly trying to interact with every idea they present, you are not really accompanying, properly speaking—you are hijacking their ideas in a sense, and putting the focus on what you're doing instead. It becomes more, "Look at me everyone, I'm so hip and adept at catching the soloist/singer's ideas!" But what it's really saying to the soloist/singer (and the audience) is: "Please like me!" It's overbearing. It feels like one of those people you know who, when in a conversation with you, is constantly affirming what you're saying—"Yeah . . . totally . . . exactly!"—before you've even finished your thought.

My comping complex was rooted in the bad old cloying social insecurity that had seeded in West Hartford—like in Mr. Mazzie's class, or at Papa Gino's [where Mehldau had an early job]. It was that fear of rejection. In the first few years in New York City, I began to excise that quality from my comping. Next, in a familiar self-referential loop, I feared that the act of excising itself was just so much more people-pleasing. Finally,

Mehldau at the Village Gate in 1990 with Leon Parker (L) and Ugonna Okegwu (R)

CHARLES RUGGIERO

I began to simply let go a bit and learn through repeated experiences in live situations, through trial and error…. A seed gets planted and then it takes some time to sprout. It sprouted to fruition, I would say, when I joined Joshua Redman's quartet a few years later.

I remembered the guy Jeremy at Papa Gino's who was flipping pies within a few short months while I struggled at the grill. He didn't give a shit—it was 5:45 evening rush hour, the place was packed and customers were eyeing him impatiently. But he was as cool as a cucumber, getting the pizzas in and out of the big oven. Maybe the thing was to just not give a shit with comping as well—not to throw away your taste and sensibility, mind you, but to bring a little of that cavalier pie-flipping thing into it. I started watching this less sensitive kind of comping going on at jam sessions or on gigs, and I didn't always dig it. But I also noticed that other people often did—most importantly, the soloists they were comping behind. So what did it matter what I thought? In building a personal aesthetic it's important to realize it's just that—personal.

The more interactive kind of comping was nevertheless a strong model. The unparalleled master was Herbie Hancock in Miles Davis' 1960s quintet (and also on many Blue Note records, playing as a sideman). When Miles or Wayne soloed, Herbie, with his incredible ears, would hear something in their line in real time. Often it might be an unexpected harmonic turn. Herbie would fuse with it, answering with a very specifically voiced chord that vindicated their idea. At its most inspired, that chord was three-tiered. It acknowledged the bracing audacity of the soloist's note choice—in Miles' case, often a long, held-out note that spanned through several chord changes—by doubling it. Yet it also underpinned that note with other harmony that gave it dimension. Finally, there were a few more lower notes in the chord that welded it to the bottom end of the tonality that Ron Carter supplied. That kind of gambit required a deeply sophisticated understanding of harmony and all its implications, and the ability to call on it in the white heat of someone's solo. If you look at all of Miles' piano players, all of them were at the top of the heap of their contemporaries in terms of harmonic sophistication—Red Garland, Wynton Kelly, Bill Evans—and Herbie pushed the bar higher.

Bill Evans was another role model. We think of Evans most often as a trio innovator. On *Kind of Blue*, though, he inaugurated a coloristic kind of comping, less tethered to the rhythmic pulse, on tunes like "So What" or "Flamenco

"ED BLACKWELL WAS QUIETLY MAJESTIC AT THE DRUMS: UNAPPROACHABLE, REALLY, IN HIS AUTHORITY; YET WELCOMING ON SOME ELEMENTAL LEVEL, LIKE FIRE COALS ON A BED OF EARTH."

Sketches." There were other strong instances as well, notably his comping on Oliver Nelson's classic *The Blues and the Abstract Truth*, or his own *Loose Blues*, comping behind Zoot Sims and Jim Hall.

The other approach for comping, just as appealing in terms of its musical results, but perhaps more difficult for me to assimilate into my own expression, was indeed the normative approach, the one that the majority of exemplary piano stylists used. It was not people-pleasing. The idea was to stay with the bass and drums as a supporting team for the soloist. After all, that's why you were part of the rhythm section as a pianist—you didn't have a special title, like "mediator between soloist and rhythm section." In this view, interactive comping was pretentious and unwelcome. Ironically, trying so hard to acknowledge the soloist or singer was rather self-important. You were stealing the soloists' thunder. Instead of validating them, you were taking the wind out of their sails by suggesting they needed finishing touches on their ideas. It might actually interrupt the flow of their story, instead of aiding it. Let them acknowledge themselves. Pianists like Red Garland, Sonny Clark, Cedar Walton, and Mal Waldron were quintessential non-pretentious compers, each in their own inimitable way, and they rubbed off on me.

Jesse did something special, though, when I played with him: he *listened back* to what I was doing, and moved with it. This was, in one light, an altruistic act as a soloist, forgoing his exclusivity as the sole narrator of the story he told. He was feeding *me*, his accompanist, something, and waiting to see what I would give back. It was a wonderful way to play, and I would find it again a few years later with Joshua Redman in his band, who initiated the same thing with me. As a comper, that back and forth exchange is not something you should bring to the table and present to the soloist or singer. You are having a dialogue, yes—but by *their* invitation. They are still the host.

It is now 1990, and Mehldau, gradually becoming more comfortable in Manhattan, changes address and finds himself amid an embarrassment of riches.

My third year in New York City, aged twenty … I moved from St. Mark's Place into a studio apartment on Jones Street in the West Village, smack in the middle of jazz heaven. Surrounding me within several blocks were blue-chip jazz clubs: the Village Vanguard, Sweet Basil, the 55 Bar, the Blue Note, the Village Gate, and Visiones. Bradley's, Fat Tuesdays, Condon's, and the Knitting Factory were only a 10-minute walk away as well.

There was so much great music around me every night. Often, there were tough decisions to make. Pianists Tommy Flanagan, Cedar Walton, Kenny Barron, Barry Harris, and Hank Jones were all titans, at the top of my list. They played regularly at Bradley's in a trio or duo setting for weeklong engagements. I watched their touch, their poise at the instrument, their complete relaxation. I listened to their individual timbres, feeling the unique collective swing of each trio—the way the beat bounced around the piano, bass, and drums.

At Sweet Basil, there was a wider range of instrumentation and style. It was the place to see hard bop veterans like Art Farmer or Lou Donaldson, Mal Waldron and Steve Lacy's trance-like duo, and Cecil Taylor's wild Feel Trio. Gil Evans had a Monday-night slot there with his pared-down big band which included all-round keyboardist and arranger Gil Goldstein, a friendly mentoring presence for us early on, and an important teacher for many at the New School. Just up four blocks at the Vanguard, any number of exalted configurations come to mind, like drummer Paul Motian's unrepeatable bassless trio with Joe Lovano and Bill Frisell. Or there was that week Ed Blackwell played with Don Pullen and George Adams, whose co-led quartet were at the Vanguard regularly. Blackwell's drumming changed everything for me. He showed how you could play in a formally unhinged context, yet create your own shifting grid, one with simplicity and integrity which nevertheless moved easily within the free current of the music. And it felt so good. It had been one thing to hear him do that on those hallmark recordings with the Ornette Coleman Quartet, but the live experience was something else.

On the Fender Rhodes at Augie's, tip basket close at hand

Mehldau in 1991

The sublime as I experienced it, with its heady duality of recognition and fear, was a *live* sublime in these memorable performances. Blackwell was quietly majestic at the drums: unapproachable, really, in his authority; yet welcoming on some elemental level, like fire coals on a bed of earth. These kinds of visceral impressions did not come from listening to records. The physical immediacy of the musicians made for a far more sensual intake, one that was not only aural/visual. As strange as it sounds, I often felt that I could even *smell* the music. It might be brown liquor: Lou Donaldson's groups, particularly with the joyous addition of Dr. Lonnie Smith on Hammond B-3 organ (and sometimes Peter Bernstein, who had one of his first gigs with an older master playing with Lou), had the bouquet of the Paddy Irish Whiskey I had recently discovered on a tour in Ireland—sweet but not cloying, bracing. Mal Waldron and Steve Lacy were more like Scotch: smokier, and there was also the real smell of smoke that came off Waldron's black tobacco cigarette which remained inexplicably lit for the duration

CHARLES RUGGIERO

"IF YOU ARE CONSTANTLY TRYING TO INTERACT WITH EVERY IDEA SOLOISTS PRESENT, YOU ARE NOT REALLY ACCOMPANYING, PROPERLY SPEAKING—YOU ARE HIJACKING THEIR IDEAS."

of the set. In Blackwell's case, there was indeed an earth smell to his playing: late summer in a forest, the ground still damp from a recent rain.

Joe Henderson played at Fat Tuesdays, often with the great Al Foster on drums. You could hear trumpeter Harry "Sweets" Edison at Condon's, still in fine form. And every Wednesday night, unless he was on tour, guitarist Mike Stern's trio was playing marathon sets at the 55 Bar practically down the street from my place, usually with electric bassist Jeff Andrews and Adam Nussbaum, whom I knew already from the 880 days in Hartford: a powerful drummer who cracked a whip under me in a few sessions I played with him at the New School. There was a $5 cover charge and you could stay as long as you wanted if you bought two drinks. Most of us were under the legal drinking age of 21, but we never got carded at any of those places in those days, even the baby-faces among us. New York City was much more anarchic then. It all began to change when Rudy Giuliani became mayor in 1994.

Particular sets, like the one with Ed Blackwell the first night I saw him, were one-off transformations for me. I would come out of the club having experienced a musical sensation I didn't know existed an hour-and-a-half earlier. Then I would think: "*That* is the real shit, what just took place. That's what I need to get in my own playing." Maybe that's the reason people become narrow in their taste as they get older—they're chasing that beautiful, incomparable initial rupture, and they want to get back to the thing that broke them free in the first place. You can't.

Those piano players I heard at Bradley's and elsewhere were distinct from each other, but they were all appealing because they had this absolutely relaxed, dancing feeling in their music. I wanted not only to play like that; I wanted to *be* like that. I wanted to carry that coolness with me. I suspected that it had something to do not only with the notes they played but the lives they led. I was projecting, or I wasn't—I think part of what I felt, intuitively, was also their experience outside of the music.

There was this chasm of life between them and me. They were elders but, far from being stuffy or didactic, these elders were *hipper* than I was, not the other way around. There was always that sophistication in their playing, a subtlety that was regal. It demanded your respect, without any words or history lessons. It was all there in the music. Whether they played or whether they stood at the bar fraternizing, they seemed to be free from earthly burdens even as they were solidly on the earth, tasting its fruit with mirth.

I was taking all that in—not just being influenced by the music but also checking out the attitude: the way the musicians carried themselves. Mal Waldron smoked those brown cigarettes while he played in the minimalist approach I had loved on records, building up just one or two ideas for a large span of time, creating a trance with his chugging swing. Billy Higgins had this particular gesture as he answered Cedar's ideas, chopping wood with his fat snare drum—like a shock of energy that snapped through his shoulders and released outwards with a nod of his head. He played with a smile like Buddha—one of delighted bliss, above mere excitement.

They were *in* the music completely, yet they were observing it, manipulating it exactly how they wanted, together as a unit. There was something almost cruel about the casual way they achieved that. How could they not lose themselves in the grandeur of it all? How could they not become entranced by their own creation? That power seemed almost dangerous—like a sword only they could hold. So it brought me a kind of fear beholding it. The live sublime they embodied could be a quiet insurrection—taking my power away as a listener, leaving me whipped, standing by the bar. They achieved it in the music with cold-blooded insouciance, like sipping whiskey, or waiting at a bus stop.

When Cedar Walton would walk off the stage, I might meet his eye before I turned away quickly, not wanting to stare. I was cowed by all those masters, and never approached them. Somewhere in me, though, the music was seeping in. I was going to have that some day. It would settle into me with time and I would speak it with the grace they had. I may have lacked self-confidence in so many areas of my life, but I always knew: that's my terrain, that's within my grasp. Not the way they are doing it—I couldn't do that—but something my own that would come out of it. I just had to stay with the music I loved, and be strong in it. And, even though I didn't want to turn square and get boxed in, I also had to stay loyal to that, and not start playing some candy-assed crap that wasn't real. Looking back, holding to those guidelines was never difficult. It was the rest of my life that was falling apart. ***JT***

THE NEXT

STEP

During the pandemic, JOEY ALEXANDER returned to home ground—and blossomed as a composer

By Geoffrey Himes
Photography by Stevie Chris

Midnight Waves," a highlight of Joey Alexander's sixth album, *Origin*, describes the nocturnal ocean off Bali, where the teenaged pianist and his parents returned home to sit out part of the pandemic. The family had lived on the island until 2011 when the eight-year-old son's prodigious keyboard talents had necessitated a move to the national capital of Jakarta—and, two-and-a-half years after that, to New York.

That latter move had kicked off a whirlwind six years of five albums, three Grammy nominations, international tours, and a deluge of media attention. But COVID brought all of that to a screeching halt. The son and his parents got off the career treadmill, got out of New York, and went back to Indonesia to decompress and decide on their next moves. Alexander was able to go to the beach, watch the moon add its icing to the incoming waves, and focus on what he most wanted from his music.

"We all need that time frame when we can rest and rejuvenate," he says. "I needed to reflect on these past years. Sometimes we pass by the big moments in our lives and the small moments too, because we get sidetracked by all the busyness. Sometimes I forget to pause and remember what has happened. It was a tough time for all of us, so we escaped to Bali for five months to clear our minds and make a fresh start."

By "all of us," he's referring to himself and his parents, Denny and Fara Sila, who have lived with Alexander since his birth in 2003 through his moves to Jakarta and then New York to his 19th birthday in June at the family's newish apartment in Baltimore. His father is still Alexander's closest musical adviser, and his mother still acts as de facto road manager. During our interview in the apartment, she stayed busy with papers nearby but only spoke up when her son needed a name or a date.

"When the pandemic hit, I had that feeling of not knowing what lay ahead," Alexander confesses. "It was an inspiring moment. I had to tell myself, 'I don't know what's next.' We were living near the ocean, so I could hear the tranquility of the waves through the window. I said to myself, 'Why don't I write about something that's right in front of me?'"

What he wanted, he realized, was to be known as more than a child prodigy who could play jazz piano at a level unheard of for one so young. He wanted to be known as a composer. He had recorded more originals on each of his successive albums, and he wanted to devote the entirety of his next project to his own compositions. And one of them would be "Midnight Waves," a musical evocation of the scene before him on the beach.

He conjured up the scene with a rippling figure in his left hand and a right-hand motif that resembled the bubbling foam as the waves crested. But there was more to the tune than mere sonic description; there was a feeling of weariness and the grateful relief of putting that exhausting work behind him for the time being. It's not easy to invest an engaging jazz tune with such emotion—especially when you won't turn 20 till the summer of 2023.

In many ways, such maturity as a composer at 19 is as impressive as the command of the keyboard that Alexander showed at 11. He recorded "Midnight Waves" as a piano-trio piece with bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Kendrick Scott at New York's Sear Studio during the week of his 18th birthday, in the summer of 2021.

"I was trying to figure out how to get the musicians into the mindset of the piece," he says. "They had never played this music before; this was their first impression of it. I was trying to communicate on a personal level, because I like to see myself in the song. But I like to see other people as well, and I was very happy with the musical insights that Larry and Kendrick brought to the piece."

"The music is a representation of who he is," Grenadier comments by phone from Switzerland, "not just as a player but also as a person. He's a very spiritual dude. He's able to use that connection in the music. The tunes are pretty complete; he wrote out some stuff for us. They're realized, so it's up to us to interpret that. The composition is there, it's just our version that has to be decided."

Alexander insists that he's always wanted to be a composer. Even his 2015 debut album, *My Favorite Things*, released when he was 11, featured one original among the standards by Thelonious Monk, Harold Arlen, John Coltrane and the like. The 2016 follow-up, *Countdown*, included three originals. The 2017 live recording, *Joey. Monk. Live!*, was an all-Monk affair, but the third

studio album, 2018's *Eclipse*, contained six originals. Alexander wrote 10 of the 12 tracks on 2020's *Warna* and all 10 of the pieces on his latest release, *Origin*.

"I wanted to write my own music from the start," he says, "but early on I still had so much to learn, so I held myself back. I wanted to play Coltrane and Monk first, so it took a moment for me to stretch out as a writer. I always wanted to share my stories, but now I have more to say, so this might be the right time and right place."

Of course, what first caught everyone's attention was his incongruously mature playing at such an early age. Even when his blue tennis shoes couldn't reach the pedals from his cranked-up-high piano bench at the Newport Jazz Festival in 2015, he could already do more than just play fast and accurately. The velocity was there when he needed it, but more often he was able to employ punctuation and dynamics to coax real feeling out of his pieces.

Herbie Hancock had been impressed when he stumbled upon an eight-year-old Alexander in Jakarta. A year later, the kid was leading a trio at the Jakarta Jazz Festival, and a year after that he won the all-ages Grand Prize at a festival in Odesa, Ukraine. A year after that, Wynton Marsalis invited Alexander to play at Lincoln Center's 2014 gala. Motéma Records signed him to a contract, and Jazz at Lincoln Center's Jason Olaine produced the *My Favorite Things* album with such heavy hitters as Grenadier (Brad Mehldau, Pat Metheny) and Ulysses Owens Jr. (Christian McBride).

"The first thing that impressed me,

obviously, was that this guy could play amazingly well at such an early age," Grenadier now says about those first sessions. "But that's the easy answer. The idea of his age quickly disappeared as soon as we started. It became more like, here's another interesting piano player to play with. He's gotten better since, but even then he was really good, not just in the big things but also in the little things like touch and timing. He was like Ahmad Jamal; he knew how to set something up and let it simmer.

"He was already going for something different than being just another bebop pianist. That's usually a thing that comes later. Most students are taking in so much information and it takes a while to filter through that and find themselves. Joey seemed to have already done that. He didn't play like anyone else. Most pianists have gone through classical music and then switched to jazz. Joey wasn't like that; he went directly to jazz."

Meeting Alexander for the first time since 2015, one is struck by how the short, chubby middle-school-age kid has lengthened into a taller, thinner college-age adolescent. On the seventh floor of his apartment building, in a nicely furnished, piano-dominated room overlooking Baltimore's Fells Point neighborhood, he is wearing blue jeans, pink socks and a gray, zippered sweatshirt.

"I played the Keystone Korner two nights in the fall of 2021," he recalls, "and we stayed in Baltimore for two extra days to look around. Immediately we felt at home, and we rented this place soon after. New York had given me a lot: the drive to be creative, to always be one step ahead of the game. But I feel at peace here; it's not as frantic as New York. That change of pace was something I needed at this time. The Keystone is a hub for the jazz community here. I can drop by and see my friends like Bill Charlap and Christian Sands play there."

What hasn't changed since his earlier incarnation are the thick-frame glasses and the sheaf of dark hair hanging over his forehead. His music too has echoes of his earlier work. The fluid fingering, the unshowy confidence and the melodic instincts of his prodigy days are still apparent. What's new is a willingness to depart from comfortable harmonies and expected development to build tension in a piece. And out of that tension grows the drama that gives his newer compositions more weight.

"Instead of the AABA form, sometimes I'll try an ABAB form," he explains. "That may seem funny, but I try to be open to different approaches. As a composer, you can control the narrative, and it's okay to make changes along the way. I don't want to be locked into the way it's always been done. The old ways are effective, but they're not the only way to do it. The important thing is to play with feeling."

"Midnight Waves" is a good example. He suggests the experience of recuperating from a draining few years by creating musical phrases that lead up to the brink of a resolution but then delay it for a beat or two, as if fatigue were causing the narrator to falter for a moment. And when the ending does land, it provides that much more satisfaction for having overcome an obstacle.

"When I'm composing," he says, "I sit down at the piano and play until I find something I like. I'll record that and listen back. Then I'll develop the piece from that theme until it becomes a composition. Along the way, of course, there will be changes, because I try to be open and find ways to say more with less. If it's a blues tune, it can all happen quickly, because I know the changes. But tunes like 'Midnight Waves,' 'On the Horizon' and 'Winter Blues' take more time to write, because they're longer and contain more layers."

"Winter Blues" is one of four season-themed pieces on the recent album, joining "Dear Autumn," "Promise of Spring" and "Summer Rising." Unlike Vivaldi's, Alexander's four seasons upend our assumptions for each time of year. "Winter Blues," for example, isn't the gray, icy music you might anticipate; instead it offers an ebullient tune over bouncy rhythms. It's not a reflection of January but rather an antidote to it.

"I tried to reverse people's expectations," Alexander admits. "Winter's a time when people don't like to go outside because it's really cold, so they stay inside. So I try to give them that happy, danceable feeling. I like to surprise the listener, and in the process I often surprise myself."

The recorded version features a quintet, with saxophonist Chris Potter and guitarist Gilad Hekselman joining Grenadier and Scott. Alexander plays both acoustic piano and Fender Rhodes, and when the push-and-pull 6/8 theme climaxes in solos on tenor, guitar and Rhodes, it sounds more than a little like *Aja*-period Steely Dan. There's even a coda of free-form improv. It's a long way from the pre-Wynton jazz canon where the young pianist began.

"Chris plays his ass off on that song," Alexander agrees. "It's important to remember the past but just as important to make new memories. I'm making them with these musicians. I want each album to have a different sound, a different feel, and that's hard to do—to sound different but still connected to what came before. It's the musicians who play on each one who make it different. I find musicians by word of mouth, but they have to be open to new possibilities. They have to know the value of a moment of silence but also be able to react to what I'm playing."

> **“I WANTED TO WRITE MY OWN MUSIC FROM THE START, BUT EARLY ON I STILL HAD SO MUCH TO LEARN, SO I HELD MYSELF BACK.”**

Those moments of silence are crucial, because the pianist is seeking a vocal-like quality for his melodies. And characteristic of such vocals are the pauses a singer or a speaker takes between phrases, and the accents that emphasize some words over others. Alexander's recent instrumentals do this quite effectively.

"Recently I've been digging more into some non-jazz music by Burt Bacharach, Michel Legrand, and the Beatles," he reveals. "By listening to their music, I get a sense of what a great melody is. It makes me aim for that vocal quality. As musicians, our instruments are our words, and we have to speak through them. If you're honest and what comes out is beautiful, that says a lot about you."

"The compositions are an extension of the way he plays the piano," Grenadier adds. "His musical fingerprint is translating to his compositions. He's not reinventing the wheel; he's using the song forms of the past but putting his own stamp on them. As you age, you get more confident speaking in your own voice, in your sound, touch, all the ways we make music, so it makes sense that Joey is increasingly present in his compositions. It's going to be interesting to watch him grow as a composer, more life experiences, more interaction with musicians. The channel is open now; he just has to feed it."

Part of being a jazz composer, Alexander soon discovered, is working out the relationship of the notated passages to the improvised sections. Some things you want to happen every time, so you write them down for the band. Some things you want to happen differently each time, so you leave room for solos. How the one interacts with the other is crucial.

"It's always best to put the composition and the improvisation together," he says. "Becoming a better composer helped me become a better improviser. Because I'm always looking for fresh lines when I write, they now come to me when I'm soloing without even thinking about it. On the other hand, a better song can inspire us to improvise better. When I'm performing my own songs, I feel I have more freedom to change them. When I play a piece that's been played by so many, I feel limited by the way it's been done before. I always try to find myself in every piece, but it's harder."

"With tunes you improvise on," Grenadier points out, "you want harmony that's interesting enough that you don't mind repeating it and form that's interesting enough that you stay committed to it. It's tricky to create compact forms that fit on one page and yet are interesting harmonically like the old standards. Joey's coming more from that approach. You're trying to improvise against the melody at first and then go somewhere from that. An improvisation should try to attain the quality of a melody that sings over the chords."

A new boldness in Alexander's compositions emerged on the 2018 album *Eclipse*. The 10-minute title track was an open-ended improvisation that found Charles Lloyd's rhythm section of Eric Harland and Reuben Rogers responding to the pianist's phrases and adding twists of their own.

"We didn't really know where it was going," Alexander admits, "but that was exciting because it could be anything. We trusted each other that when they reacted to my vamps, somehow we would find a home where we could come together."

Paradoxically, *Eclipse* was both looser and bolder, less prescribed and more ambitious. He was less worried about nailing down every detail beforehand and yet reaching for ever newer, ever stronger effects. The more assured he became of his composing, the more relaxed he became about his band's improvising. This breakthrough led to the two albums with Kendrick and Grenadier—*Warna* and *Origin*—as well as his current

live shows with bassist Kris Funn and drummer John Davis.

"When I bring in a new song," he says, "I will share the charts with the musicians. But when we start playing, I want them to use their instincts rather than relying on the chart. I want them to play feelings, not just the notes. They hear different things than I do, and I want those different things on the record. I like to leave space for other people to come in and share the music with me—not just the other musicians but also the audience. Once the compositions are completed, I don't really know how the music's going to sound till I get together with the group. It's such a relief when I realize, 'Wow, this music is flying.'"

You can hear that on the new album, especially when Potter grabs hold of one of Alexander's themes and takes off for a soaring solo—on soprano for "On the Horizon" and on tenor for "Rise Up." On the latter tune, written in 9/8, the long measures seem to grease the momentum as the piece builds from tentative beginning to robust, collective improvisation at the end.

"On this new album," Grenadier confirms, "there were moments of him wanting to open things up. It wasn't free-free, but it was free within the parameters of meter and key. He didn't go to music school, so he doesn't always know the terminology, so you have to figure out by what he wants by listening to what he plays more than what he says, which I dig, because it allows more possibilities; it's not like everything else.

"It reminded me of back in history, when there would be territorial sounds: a St. Louis sound, a Kansas City sound, a Chicago sound. But that has gone by the wayside as we have access to all this information. But Joey has that kind of different signature. Maybe it's because he was isolated from the jazz scene when he started playing. Maybe this is the start of the Bali sound." ***JT***

NAD C 399 BluOS-D
integrated amplifier

SVS Prime Wireless Pro
Speaker System

Meze Audio 109 Pro
Headphones

Gear of the Year for 2022

From cutting-edge components to cool retro throwbacks, here are our favorite audio products from the last year

BY BRENT BUTTERWORTH

Despite lingering COVID concerns and supply-chain constrictions, the audio industry somehow managed to come up with a whole new slew of appealing products. While 2022 didn't yield any major sonic revolutions, it did produce many new products that are more technologically versatile than ever, and a few more basic products that still managed to excel even in categories that have been evolving for decades.

Here are the new products from 2022 that we thought might most excite *JazzTimes* readers—from high-tech, noise-canceling earphones to traditional (yet terrific) tower speakers.

SVS PRIME WIRELESS PRO SPEAKER SYSTEM ($899.99)

Active speakers with built-in amplifiers and streaming capabilities have been the hottest trend in hi-fi for the last few years, because you just plug them and use your phone or the Internet as a source. The Prime Wireless Pro not only sounds really good, it offers some nice extra conveniences, such as a subwoofer output; six programmable content presets (so you can immediately access, say, a Sonny Rollins playlist or your favorite jazz station); and an HDMI eARC input that lets the speakers work like they're part of your TV.

MEZE AUDIO 109 PRO HEADPHONES ($799)

Romania's Meze Audio has won over audiophiles with high-end headphones priced from $2,000 to $4,000, but the 109 Pro brings much of Meze's sound quality and design panache down to a more affordable price. Not only are they among the best-sounding headphones we've ever heard, they easily rank among the most beautifully crafted headphones we've ever seen—and you can drive them with anything from a fancy amp to a smartphone.

NAD C 399 BLUOS-D INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER ($2,599)

Lots of integrated amps—which combine a power amp and a preamp—now incorporate some kind of streaming, but the C 399 BluOS-D has the best kind of streaming: BluOS, which can play high-resolution files stored on a networked computer or hard drive, as well as all major streaming services. The 180-watt-per-channel amp also includes a subwoofer output, an HDMI ARC input, a phono input, and Dirac Live, which automatically calibrates your audio system to sound best in your room.

MONITOR AUDIO SILVER 300 7G ($2,422.50/PAIR)

The 7G is the seventh revision of a speaker design that already sounded great when it was introduced decades ago, and just keeps getting better. With two 6-inch

Monitor Audio Silver 300 7G

Pro-Ject E1 Turntable

Polk MagniFi Mini AX Soundbar

Audio-Technica AT-SB2022 Sound Burger Portable Record Player

Beyerdynamic Free Byrd True Wireless Earphones

woofers, a 3-inch midrange and a 1-inch tweeter, it can easily cover everything from Elvin Jones' most enthusiastic bass-drum kicks to Eric Dolphy's fleetest flute solos, all with exceptional clarity and realism. Optional, matching center and surround speakers expand the Silver 300 7G into a full home theater system.

PRO-JECT E1 TURNTABLE ($349 TO $499)
The E1 is the latest budget turntable from Pro-Ject, building on a basic design the company introduced in the early 1990s, and that's been earning praise from audiophiles ever since. It comes in three versions: the basic E1 at $349; the $399 E1 Phono with a built-in phono preamp; and the $499 E1 BT, with a built-in preamp and Bluetooth transmitter. Although it's fully adjustable, the E1 is basically plug'n'play—factory-adjusted for the included Ortofon OM 5e cartridge.

POLK MAGNIFI MINI AX SOUNDBAR ($399)
The MagniFi Mini AX is just 14½ inches long, but it sounds more enveloping than most larger soundbars do—which means it can conjure up convincing sonic images of anything from Carnegie Hall to Batman's Gotham City, all from its 3D Sound mode. Not only does it connect to your TV, but it also works as a surprisingly sweet-sounding music system, streaming through Bluetooth or Google Chromecast.

BEYERDYNAMIC FREE BYRD TRUE WIRELESS EARPHONES ($229)
The Free Byrds easily rank among the best-sounding true wireless earphones we've heard—and despite the name, their neutral, natural tonal balance makes them even better for jazz than they are for rock. On top of that, they feature very good noise canceling, they can personalize their response to suit your hearing, and they'll run about 11 hours on a charge, which is well above average for true wireless.

AUDIO-TECHNICA AT-SB2022 SOUND BURGER PORTABLE RECORD PLAYER ($199)
With vinyl more popular than it's been in decades, it's no surprise Audio-Technica decided to reintroduce the Sound Burger, its iconic 1970s-era portable record player. But this time, the Burger's got a built-in Bluetooth transmitter, so it can beam sound to Bluetooth speakers or headphones—and we were shocked to hear how good it sounded even through a little $200 wireless speaker. There's also a line output that lets you connect it to a conventional stereo system. ***JT***

Danilo Pérez

Explaining the Taubman Approach

Many jazz pianists swear by it—but what is it exactly?

BY MICHAEL J. WEST

Several years ago, one of Danilo Pérez's students was suffering from tendinitis. Pianist Pérez was then a professor at the New England Conservatory; his student, also a pianist, experienced muscle fatigue and pain when he played. "I gave him the normal recipe: 'Stop playing, let it come down, and then start again,'" Pérez recalls. "And I gave him some tips. But nothing worked. I felt committed to helping him, so I started searching around. And that's how I got to the Taubman piano school."

Taubman (or the Taubman Approach) is indeed the name for a school of thought, a piano method formulated by music pedagogue Dorothy Taubman. But what Pérez found was a literal school: the Golandsky Institute. Its director, Edna Golandsky, is an Israeli-born concert pianist and educator who is also the foremost authority on the work and ideas of Taubman (who died in 2013). Pérez made an appointment to get more information, and had his world rocked.

"She had me play, she made a video and made notes when I played, and she broke it down," he says. "She said, 'You know why you are not playing more octaves? Because you are doing this wrong, and you need to work on it.' She was talking about physics, movement, and when she was done, I said, 'I came here for information for my student, but *I* wanna be *your* student.'"

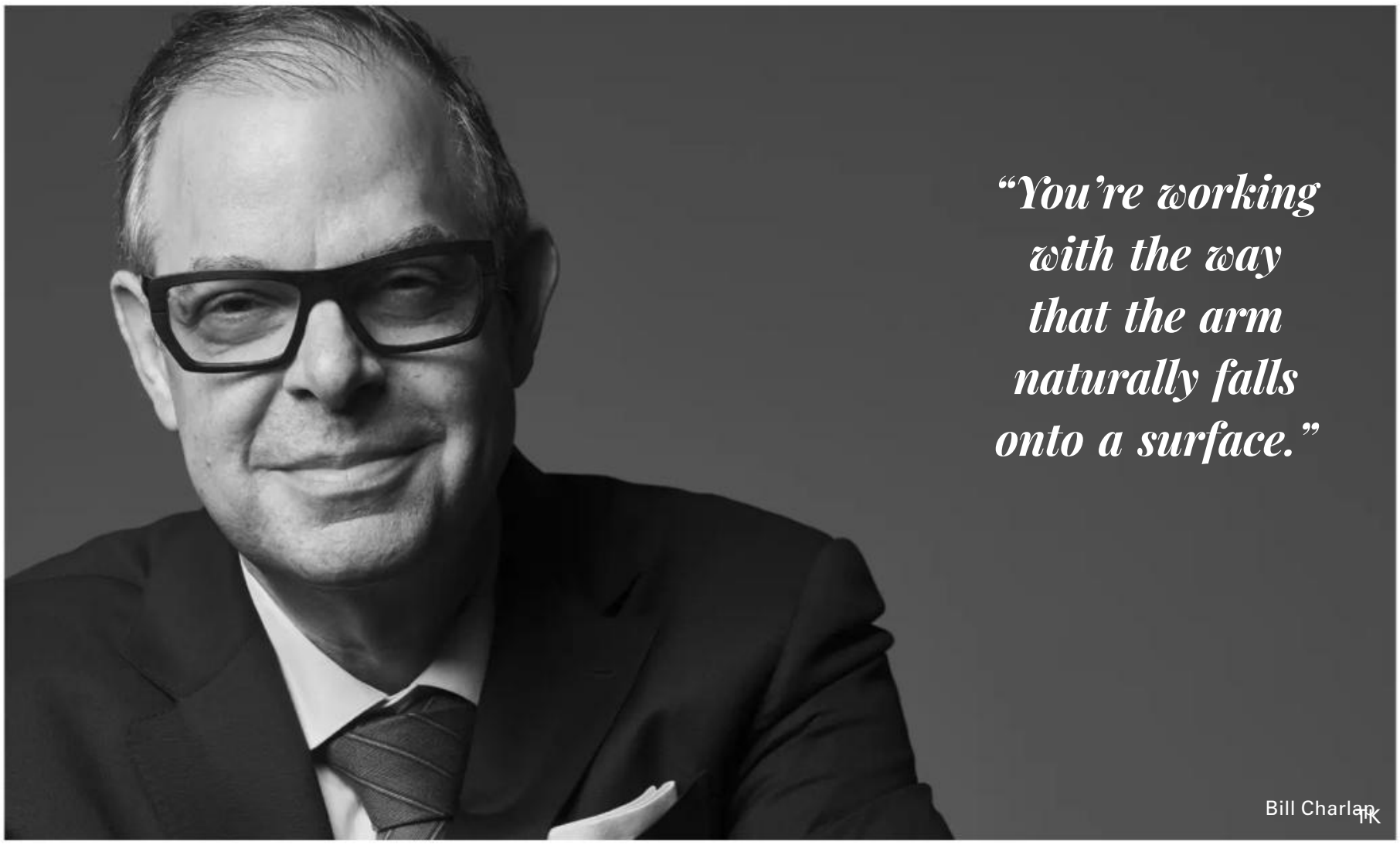
Golandsky says that the kind of profound experience Pérez had is one that she sees a lot when people first encounter the Taubman approach. "If you do it right, it transforms your playing totally," she says. "And as a result it transforms *you*, because you become a happier person, no longer frustrated or in pain."

If there's one word to sum up the Taubman approach, the word is "holistic." It teaches that contrary to much of piano pedagogy, playing the instrument is not about the fingers in and of themselves.

"Our fingers are an extension of the entire body, but more importantly of the mechanism that puts the fingers on the keys, which means the hand and the wrist," says pianist Bill Charlap, who like Perez swears by Taubman. "Fingers connected to the meat of the hand, connected to the wrist, connected to the forearm, connected to the upper arm."

The goal, then, is to retrain the hands and arms so that a pianist's physical efforts are balanced across that entire mechanism rather than concentrated in the fingers. In particular, the Taubman approach emphasizes the rotation of the wrist and forearm in moving the fingers over the keys.

TITO HERRERA



"It's not *twisting* the wrist," Charlap cautions, "because it's about not getting in awkward or uncomfortable or unnatural positions for your wrist, hand, and finger. You're working with the way that the arm naturally falls onto a surface when you just let gravity do the work, and with the natural reflexive ways that you move your arms in your everyday movements."

That sense of natural movement is a key aspect of the Taubman approach. Golandsky often works with onetime child prodigies, people who instinctually learned the instrument. "Then they went to conservatory and the teachers said, 'You have to move your fingers more, do the exercises,' and their natural technique completely deteriorated," she explains. "Then, when I bring them back, they say, 'This is how it used to feel.'"

Indeed, one of Taubman's axioms is that overemphasis on the fingers is not only unnatural but actively harmful. For example, traditional piano pedagogues like Czerny and Hanon stress training the fourth and fifth fingers—which are naturally restrained relative to the other fingers by a tendon in the hand—to use equal force as their counterparts.

"It's ridiculous. It's a mistake," says pianist Ethan Iverson. Not quite a devotee on the level of Pérez or Charlap, he still endorses the approach after taking some lessons with Golandsky's colleague John Bloomfield. "It'll hurt you if you actually try to force your fingers to all strike with the same level of velocity." The classic example is the 19th-century composer and pianist Robert Schumann, who permanently hobbled his hand by using weights to try and strengthen his fourth finger.

Golandsky has seen plenty of other examples too. "People come with tension, people come with fatigue, people come with pain," she says. "They go to doctors, they go to therapists; the tendency is to try and deal with the symptoms, but not with the causes. People don't think it has much to do with the playing itself."

Healing is a great part of what the Taubman approach can do for musicians, but it is also applicable before such injuries occur—simply by providing concrete answers to learners' questions. "When I ran into limitations as a student, there was nothing out there to address it except 'Go and practice more,' or doing exercises," Golandsky says. "When I came to Dorothy and asked questions about problems, about limitations, I heard rational explanations and answers. I never got that anywhere else."

But what really speaks volumes, they say, are the results. After finding their ways out of old, bad habits,Pérez, Charlap, and Iverson have all found themselves able to do things they simply couldn't before. Pérez, in fact, says that in addition to solving technical problems and limitations, studying with Golandsky has introduced more singing tone to his playing. He relates it to the flow of energy and movement the technique encourages. "I study tai chi," he says. "Taubman is very much the same: Learning these basic, fundamental movements that give you the ground to acquire that kind of synchronicity." Golandsky agrees, also drawing parallels with Pilates and other disciplines that emphasize alignment and holistic uses of the human body.

She does find, however, that even musicians who struggle with injuries and other physical problems can be intimidated by the promise of sweeping changes to their practice. "They are afraid it will take away the mystery of the creative process, or that it will make everyone sound the same," she says. "My answer is, when painters learn how to mix colors and brush technique, they don't end up painting the same picture.

"In other words, you have to have the craft to give you the freedom to actualize who you are. Music, like all art, needs a craft—and the craft frees you to be what you want. That's what the Taubman approach can do for you." ***JT***

KEITH MAJOR

"Confident that you'll come listening for his business": Joe Chambers

In Good Hands

Distinguished veteran Joe Chambers takes us on a multicultural voyage

JOE CHAMBERS

Dance Kobina

Blue Note

Joe Chambers (no relation to Paul Chambers) grew up near Philadelphia, turned pro in 1963 at age 21, and racked up session time with Lee Konitz, Stanley Cowell, Art Farmer, McCoy Tyner, and many more—in addition to many albums as a leader and many composer credits. He switches between drums, vibes, and piano, although he sticks to the first two for this set. That's his name up front once more, but he's generous to his many and shifting sidepeople here and content to lay in the background, confident that you'll come listening for his business. As you will, given the rewards multiple listens (through headphones) are sure to grant you.

Montreal pianist Andrés Vial certainly sets the tone on the three tunes (out of nine) where he writes, plays, and co-produces. The aim there, at least, was to plumb the nexus where jazz, Latin, and African musics connect, aided by Vial's doubling on bombos legüeros (Argentine drums fashioned from hollow tree trunks, with animal skins for heads) and Elli Miller Maboungou's employment of African ngoma drums, developed by the Bantu peoples.

Throughout swirling interplays on top, Chambers ticks over with the casual mastery of a lifetime, skipping beats, pushing, laying back, doubling, and even throwing down silence when appropriate, never missing a nuance. His composition "Ruth," no doubt an ode to a special lady, benefits from brushwork before sticks on cymbals, Richard Germanson's careful piano, and Marvin Carter's alto—curiously fitting in and sticking out from the background simultaneously. All in all, a rich, elegant, satisfying set from a quiet talent, still green and growing.

—ANDREW HAMLIN

DEZRON DOUGLAS

Atalaya

International Anthem

"Forward," intones each member of Dezron Douglas' quartet, punctuated by the percussive clack of wooden claves, at the outset of the bassist's latest album. Based on the music that follows, Douglas regards the word not in terms of radical reinvention but simply as a reminder of the continuum of tradition.

A protégé of Jackie McLean, Douglas has been a prolific sideman

across a wide spectrum of styles, working with straightahead masters (Cyrus Chestnut, Mulgrew Miller, Louis Hayes); searching firebrands (Pharoah Sanders, David Murray); modern torchbearers (Ravi Coltrane, Brandee Younger); post-modernists (Makaya McCraven); and even jazz-influenced rock artists (Phish's Trey Anastasio).

Many of those streams converge on *Atalaya*, Douglas' first full-length release as a leader in four years. The paw print on the cover seems to link the album with his 2018 EP *Black Lion*, which felt like a redefining effort with its boisterous sextet arrangements and influences from funk, soul, and reggae. Instead, Atalaya debuts a new quartet—with saxophonist Emilio Modeste, keyboardist George Burton, and drummer Joe Dyson, Jr.—and locks into a fervent hard-bop mode, with occasional detours into free playing or Afro-Latin grooves.

The tone is set by the title track, which follows that opening incantation with a bold, propulsive groove that suddenly erupts into Sanders-style transcendent turbulence. "Rosé" boasts the warming elegance of a lush, well-balanced wine, while "Coyoacán" takes off at a gallop and maintains that pace until its airy coda. The elusive "Luna Moth" is an aptly eclectic tribute to the inventive bassist Mario Pavone, who passed away in 2021. Douglas goes it alone on "Octopus," venturing into electric fusion with his effects-altered bass before the band closes the album with the sultry, tango-inflected "Foligno." Douglas brings these eclectic influences together into a cohesive sound more accessible than adventurous.

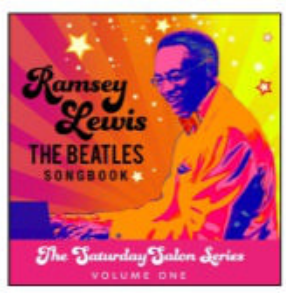
—SHAUN BRADY

RAMSEY LEWIS

The Beatles Songbook: The Saturday Salon Series, Volume One

Steele

Ramsey Lewis first found fame in the early '60s by interpreting pop hits, specifically Dobie Gray's "The 'In' Crowd," which crossed over into the *Billboard* Top 10 in 1965, and the McCoys' "Hang on Sloopy" later that year. His first major flirtation with the music of the Beatles came the following year, when the highly prolific



pianist's take on "A Hard Day's Night" snuck into the Top 30. *The Beatles Songbook: The Saturday Salon Series, Volume One*, a solo piano work, was recorded in the summer of 2022, just a month before Lewis' death at age 87.

Unsurprisingly, it's a touching, sensitive and intelligently executed tribute. Although he sticks largely to the Fab Four's ballads ("And I Love Her," "Michelle"), Lewis allows himself to indulge in flights of fancy that often drift from the basic melody. That approach is stated midway through the opening track, Paul McCartney's "Here, There and Everywhere," wherein Lewis temporarily abandons the song's sweet tunefulness in favor of a deep dive into note-heavy complexity. His choice to eschew accompaniment throughout the recording gives Lewis all the leeway he could hope for, and he makes use of that freedom often.

But Lewis' respect for the composers' intent is never abused. Whether on a song as seemingly random as "Rocky Raccoon" or one covered by thousands of artists before him ("Yesterday," "Blackbird"), Lewis' homages never fail to honor the Beatles' essence, even as he puts his own distinctive stamp on a melody. If there's one extraneous track on the dozen-song collection, however, that would be John Lennon's "Imagine," the only number from a solo Beatle's catalog. It's been done too many times by too many people, and Lewis adds nothing new to it. That aside, *The Beatles Songbook* is a perfect bookend to a long and illustrious career.

—JEFF TAMARKIN

FRANK ZAPPA

Waka/Wazoo

Zappa/UMe

Perhaps no other composer in history touched on so many different variations as guitarist/vocalist Frank Zappa (1940-1993), who fused rock, doo-wop, blues, jazz, classical, comedy and beyond. The new, five-disc *Waka/Wazoo* boxed set features alternate takes from his albums *Waka/Jawaka* and *The Grand Wazoo*, both from 1972, along with the original album tracks in Blu-Ray Audio;

RANDY COLE

previously unreleased Zappa-engineered demo recordings by his keyboardist/vocalist George Duke; and a live set by Zappa's 10-piece band from the Winterland Ballroom in San Francisco in late 1972.

There are differences from the original studio recordings, both sonically and in sequencing, since these tracks are presented in the order in which they were recorded at Paramount Studios through 1972. Zappa had returned home to Los Angeles to recover from a broken leg sustained when he was pushed off the stage by an unruly audience member at the Rainbow Theatre in London. Confined to a wheelchair, he figuratively had a guitar in one hand and a conductor's baton in the other throughout these sessions.

Disc 1 starts with behind-the-scenes banter leading to the bluesy "Your Mouth (Take 1)," from *Waka/Jawaka*, followed by a slightly shorter alternate take of that album's lengthy instrumental opener "Big Swifty." It features Duke's electric piano explorations, the deranged trumpet of Sal Marquez, and complex drumming of Aynsley Dunbar. Zappa's percussion work, mostly on cowbells, is also featured in addition to his signature guitar playing.

Instrumental tracks from *The Grand Wazoo* follow—the strutting "Minimal Art (Eat That Question—Version 1, Take 2)" and orchestral "Blessed Relief (Outtake Version)"—performed by Zappa's 20-piece "electric orchestra." More outtake and alternate versions extend through Disc 2, highlighted by a 15-minute "Waka/Jawaka" and a hysterical romp through "Cletus Awreetus-Awrightus" from *The Grand Wazoo*.

Duke (1946-2013) was part of some of Zappa's best-ever ensembles and recordings during his 1970-1975 tenure. Much of his solo output, including many of the tracks demoed on Disc 3, would consist of more soulful, R&B-based recordings. These demos split the difference between those and the colorful, comedic keyboardist's jazz/fusion pairings with the likes of bassist Stanley Clarke and drummer Billy Cobham.

Zappa's influence is profound. The title to the instrumental "Psychosomatic Dung" alone is proof, as are his guitar contributions amid Duke's mix of electric piano and synthesizers. "Uncle Remus," co-written with Zappa, showcases Duke's nimble acoustic piano skills in an instrumental version that would appear, with vocals, on Zappa's 1974

gem *Apostrophe*. Others like "Love" spotlight Duke's singing; his contributions arguably had as big an impact on Zappa's bands as the bandleader through the first half of the 1970s.

The live material is quintessential Zappa. "Little Dots," with slide guitarist Tony Duran and drummer Jim Gordon, approximates "Mountain Jam" by the Allman Brothers Band, but with an acidic horn section including trumpeters Gary Barone and Tom Malone and trombonist Bruce Fowler. Banner extended readings of both future ("Cosmik Debris") and previously released ("Chunga's Revenge") faves put a bow on this box.

—BILL MEREDITH

JULIUS RODRIGUEZ

Let Sound Tell All: Deluxe Edition

Verve

Julius Rodriguez doesn't want to play the trite parlor game, "But is it jazz?" The 24-year-old keyboardist/drummer named his debut album *Let Sound Tell All*, because when its ambitious array of styles come at you like a mosaic more than a melting pot, definitions are moot. Sure, Rodriguez and the peers he picks to populate each song revel in the strut of technique and technology. And the three songs

he adds on this "deluxe edition" of the record originally released last summer lean further into that wizardry. But his artistry is fundamentally imbued with the heft of tradition and a defining character of soulfulness.

His seamless segue from live to studio on the trio number "Blues in the Barn" is a neat sleight-of-hand, but the thrill comes from the way his acoustic piano phrases spiral and snake with the creative gusto of Bud Powell. On the duet "Two Way Street," Rodriguez keeps his snare drum at a steady simmer while tenor Morgan Guerin comes forth in gusts a la Joshua Redman—but both instruments occasionally get funneled through a synthesizer, morphing on and off from human to superhero, like in a Marvel movie. Then, for good measure, the duet is completed with Rodriguez on piano and Guerin on electric bass.

Two of the three songs added to the deluxe edition—"Chemical X" and "Starmaker"—are studio playthings, with samples (an air raid on the former, an ambulance on the latter) yielding to galactic dreamy interludes and plenty of natty percussion as Rodriguez satisfies his jones for beats. The other tune, opener "Dora's Lullaby," is peaceably set to a three-note piano vamp. All are worth hearing, but not grievous omissions from the original summer release.

—BRITT ROBSON

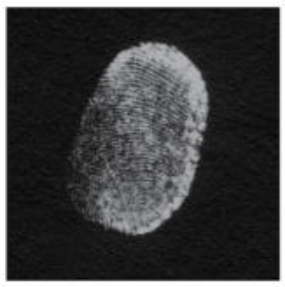
PATRICIA BRENNAN

More Touch

Pyroclastic

The vibraphone and marimba are heading into new musical terrain under the mallets of Patricia Brennan. In addition to her skills as a gifted improviser, she uses electronics to bend and twist the sounds that she draws out of her vibes. The most definitive example comes in the soca reggae groove of "Unquiet Respect," where Brennan's pitch-twisting effects add to the upbeat mood by replicating the sound of a DJ scratching on a turntable.

For *More Touch*, Brennan's sophomore release as a leader, she assembles a group inspired by percussion



quartets of her conservatory days, while her writing still leaves room for improvisation. The group's bassist, Kim Cass, acts as a melodic anchor but also fits in well with the percussive lineup of Brennan, Marcus Gilmore (drums) and Mauricio Herrera (percussion). Along with more concise tracks full of taut grooves or repetition ("Square Bimagic"), the quartet takes time in the nearly 15-minute "Space for Hour" to feel the space in the music before coming together for the momentum of a composed section. "The Woman Who Weeps" presents a pensive composed work; "El Nahualli (The Shadow Soul)" gives them a chance to unravel into a warped freedom before converging again.

While each piece contains its own set of musical features, the whole 70-minute album can feel like a bit much in one burst. Brennan's pitch-bending definitely adds to the music but sometimes a little more restraint would have put the focus on her technique and writing. The percussion instrumentation has built-in drive to it, yet the melodic or dynamic qualities of the music sound similar during several tracks in a row. Still, it's clear Brennan has a bold future ahead with the vision she displays as a leader and player.

—MIKE SHANLEY

DONALD BYRD

Live: Cookin' with Blue Note at Montreux July 5, 1973

Blue Note

Donald Byrd had spent the latter half of the 1950s recording for a series of indie and major labels before Blue Note Records picked him up in 1959. He released around 20 albums for the company before 1973, when one of them, *Black Byrd*, suddenly elevated this critically appreciated but not particularly saleable trumpeter's profile in a big way. The album, produced and almost entirely written by Larry Mizell, emphasized Byrd's cautious move toward a funkier sound and became one of Blue Note's highest-charting LPs. By the time he performed at that year's Montreux Jazz Festival, Donald Byrd, despite having been on the scene for nearly two decades, was enjoying the fruits of true stardom for the first time.

The Montreux gig—five tracks and band intros totaling 45 minutes, the tape of which had been lost until recently—reveals an

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"An atypical outcat": Avram Fefer

EDITOR'S PICK

AVRAM FEFER QUARTET

Juba Lee

Clean Feed

If Avram Fefer is a new name to you, you are not alone. His new album is so good it should make us all embarrassed to have missed him.

Fefer's primary affiliation is the avant-garde, but he is an atypical outcat. *Juba Lee* is his second release with a quartet that was formed when guitarist Marc Ribot joined Fefer's longstanding trio with bassist Eric Revis and drummer Chad Taylor. The opening track, "Showtime," a basic, rousing anthem, sounds like a song by a bebopper until Fefer blows it up with his blasting, guttural solo. He is a commanding, implacable, exhilarating tenor saxophonist.

He also kills on alto. "Love Is in the Air" is a ballad, one of the most searing and raw you will ever hear. Over Taylor's relentless drum disturbances, Fefer slowly ascends from heartfelt calls to shrieking catharsis, then subsides.

Throughout, Fefer's stealth weapon is Ribot, who segues seamlessly between inside and outside. Whenever Ribot joins an ensemble as a sideman, whether Diana Krall's or Fefer's, he always adopts its aesthetic, then pushes it.

"Sweet Fifteen (for G.T.)" is an elegy for Fefer's close friend, the musician and writer Greg Tate, who died in 2021. It is in 15/8, with Fefer on bass clarinet and Ribot on acoustic guitar. Unexpectedly, it stays rapt and inward. But it never sounds merely sad. It operates in a domain you don't expect Fefer to know about: peacefulness and acceptance.

The showstopper is "Bedouin Dream." Its twitching, snaking progress is driven by Revis' insidious ostinato. It is hypnotic and addictive. Joined at the hip in unison, Fefer and Ribot burn the melody into the air, then they separate and trade incitements. If the world were a perfect place of justice and meritocracy, "Bedouin Dream" would make them both famous.

— THOMAS CONRAD

even more aggressive push into the direction of funk than *Black Byrd* had. Leading a nine-piece band that included both Larry Mizell on synths and his brother Fonce on trumpet, Byrd tapped into the emerging fusion style of the day, giving ample jamming space to guitarist Barney Perry (who enjoys his wah-wah just a little too much), Larry Mizell's and Kevin Toney's electric keys, and the rhythm section. The title track from "Black Byrd" opens the set, but it's not until the second number, Stevie

Bookin' with Blue Note at Montreux
DONALD BYRD/LIVE
Bookin' with Blue Note at Montreux
Bookin' with Blue Note at Montreux
Bookin' with Blue Note at Montreux

Wonder's "You Got it Bad Girl," that Byrd reminds his audience that it's his trumpet work that first attracted Blue Note.

As the set settles into a groove, the aggregation takes more exploratory liberties: The trio of Byrd compositions that round out the set—"The East," "Kwame" and ""Po-co-Mania"—are all on fire. But then it's over, way too soon, leaving the listener wondering just what else they had in them.

—JEFF TAMARKIN

ART BLAKEY & THE JAZZ MESSENGERS

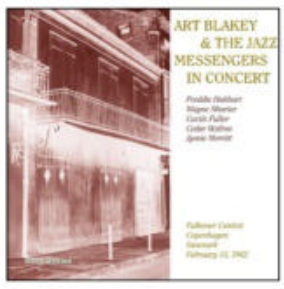
In Concert 1962

SteepleChase

Recorded in Copenhagen, this set captures one of the most fabled editions of the Messengers—trumpeter Freddie Hubbard, saxophonist Wayne Shorter, trombonist Curtis Fuller, pianist Cedar Walton, and the now-too-often-forgotten bassist Jyme Merritt, along with their indefatigable leader—in full flight. It's the usual mix of standards and originals, this time contributed by Shorter ("Contemplation," "Lester Left Town") and Fuller ("Arabia"), in the classic hard-swinging Messengers style.

Shorter's solo on "Moon River" sets the pace: This "river" is closer to a tsunami than the gently rippling dreamscape of Mercer and Arlen's original vision. Throughout, Hubbard summons both the technical brio of old-school bebop and the gospel fervor of the burgeoning hard-bop style; Fuller likewise melds acuity, imagination, and a timbral sureness that rivals such bop-era progenitors as J.J. Johnson; Walton exploits the percussive, as well as melodic and harmonic, capacities of his instrument, creating shifting textural landscapes that he then negotiates effortlessly. And Blakey, of course, is an unstoppable force of nature.

Hubbard's muted tenderness as he caresses Monk's "'Round Midnight" is toughened by his wry humor and



the unwavering focus of his extended lines; Shorter's "Contemplation" lives up to its title, albeit infused with forward-driving impetus devoid of bathos; "It's Only A Paper Moon" is a flat-out romp, spiced by Walton's sly insertion of a quote from Monk's "Rhythm-a-Ning"; Shorter's solo on Fuller's "Arabia" is a six-minute-plus marathon that explodes into uncharted realms of power and imaginative intensity.

Such is the heat and virtuosity these artists summon that it can be almost exhausting listening to take them on their own terms and rise to meet the bar they set, but it's well worth the effort: a bracing flight of inspiration, challenges, and, most importantly (as William Blake would remind us), "wing'd exulting swift delight."

—DAVID WHITEIS

AUBREY JOHNSON & RANDY INGRAM

Play Favorites

Sunnyside

Before her 2019 debut album *Unraveled* introduced her as a songwriter with a keen ear as an arranger and composer, Aubrey Johnson had already earned widespread notice with her bright, crystalline tone and creative

versatility via her work supporting fellow vocal explorers such as Bobby McFerrin, Sara Serpa, and Sofia Rei and contributions to recordings by Brian Carpenter's Ghost Train Orchestra, Joe Phillips' Numinous Ensemble, and Andrew Rathbun Large Ensemble. Her follow-up, *Play Favorites*, offers a very different glimpse at an artist who's still stretching her wings.

Partnering with Randy Ingram, a pianist with a gift for distilling harmonic essentials, the duo project features a ballad-centric program sifted from a wide array of sources, starting with a beguiling take on Billie Eilish/Finneas O'Connell's "My Future" that accentuates the melody's gentle contours so that it could have come from the pen of Sara Gazarek. Equally arresting on standards like "If I Should Lose You" and "Born to Be Blue," Johnson is particularly striking on Joni Mitchell's "Conversation," navigating the upper register leaps with the liquid grace.

The brightest thread running through the project is their deep love of the Brazilian Songbook. Singing in Portuguese, Johnson renders Chico Buarque, Antônio Carlos Jobim and Vinícius de Moraes' abject lament "Olha Maria" in luminous pastels. Ingram's love of classical music shines through on their setting of Toninho Horto and Ronaldo Bastos's "Bons Amigos." Another standout is Johnson's take on her uncle Lyle Mays' "Quem é Você," which was introduced as Pat Metheny Group instrumental "Close to Home" and recorded most memorably with Luiz Avellar's lyric by Milton Nascimento. It's another sublime bloom in a garden, lovingly tended since the mid-20th century, where jazz and Brazilian hybrids proliferate. Johnson's harvest with Ingram is bountiful indeed.

—ANDREW GILBERT

MASAHIKO TOGASHI

Song of Soil

WEWANTSOUNDS

Japanese drummer/composer Masahiko Togashi was a brilliant, tragic, ultimately inspiring musician who triumphed over serious obstacles in his career. He had already established himself as a creative improviser when his wife stabbed him in a fit of jealousy in 1969, forcing him into a custom-designed

wheelchair for the rest of his life. But with a big heart and steely determination he kept playing, recording this recently reissued trio session from Paris with Don Cherry and Charlie Haden in 1979.

With Cherry and Haden joining Togashi,

BILL WADMAN

there are obviously echoes of Ornette Coleman, but it might also put you in mind of Codona—another groundbreaking exploratory trio with Don Cherry, Nana Vasconcelos, and Collin Walcott—which released their first album for ECM that same year.

The music has spiritual elements and they know how to let the music breathe. On "Rain," Cherry is darting, like a restless bee. Haden is earthy, woody, dark and deep. Sadly, this track fades out at 8:10 (wonder how long they kept going?). On the title track, Togashi releases the snarewires underneath his snare drum, giving it a tribal sound, especially effective with Cherry's recorder noodling on top. "June" starts busily, then the time starts to expand and flow as the music takes in oxygen. Cherry plays with an occasional exaggerated vibrato, as on "Oasis," but then the trio starts collectively swirling in a vibrant sound painting.

Togashi continued making inspired recordings with Paul Bley, Steve Lacy, Albert Mangelsdorff, Mashiko Sato, Masabumi Kikuchi, and his own group J.J. Spirits with Kosuke Mine. May he become better known to discerning jazz fans and collectors.

—LARRY APPELBAUM

BEN LAMAR GAY

Certain Reveries

International Anthem

Chicago-based polymath Ben LaMar Gay makes music that is austere and sprawling. Like many musicians of his generation, he regards genre boundaries with something bordering on contempt. His music gracefully moves through jazz, post-rock, Brazilian, electronic, and about a half dozen other styles without sounding like a flex. Instead, his music's broad diversity makes his introspective declarations more urgent and savvier, as if he's found the key to a special sort of inspiration.

His latest recording, *Certain Reveries*, is the leanest of his recent efforts, and the circumstances of the composition may have had a little to do with that. The music was conceived as a single longform piece, composed for Gay and percussionist Chris Strong, and it was presented as part of the EFG London Livestream festival in 2020. There was to be a film accompanying the piece showing Gay alone in his Chicago apartment. However, the music was also

inspired by the great, boisterous music of saxophonist Eddie Harris, though the connection is abstract at best.

Certain Reveries opens with electronically altered music that sounds like field recordings on the opening track, "You Ain't Never Lied." Then it shifts to drum and cornet duets on "Parade Debris." Gay's cornet recalls the puckish precision of Lester Bowie with a side helping of Wadada Leo Smith introspection. The two approaches converge nicely on "The Bioluminescence of Nakedness" and "Agua Futurism" demonstrating both depth and elegance. Overall, the recording and its recent predecessors, *Open Arms to Open Us* and *East of the Ryan*, establish Gay as another ambitious outpost in a Chicago music scene that champions relentless innovation.

—MARTIN JOHNSON

SATOKO FUJII

Hyaku: One Hundred Dreams

Libra Records

Staggering to contemplate, but Satoko Fujii marks 100 records as a leader with this release—dating back to 1996's *Something About Water*, with Paul Bley. She celebrates alongside eight of her favorite collaborators, and while the resulting "One Hundred Dreams" suite (in five parts) lacks the splendid cacophony found in much free jazz, it more than compensates with collective intelligence.

Fujii sets off her own set, seemingly combining form with content as lines spiral and spark all the way down her keyboard. Japanese expat Ikue Mori (who just collected a MacArthur Fellowship "genius grant") launches electronic squirklings that smear from birdsong to running water to rubbery jabs. Bassoonist Sara Schoenbeck pushes her axe, unconventional for jazz, into the warm, rounded tone of the French horn, before a return to roots woodsiness.

Wadada Leo Smith and Natuski Tamara (Fujii's husband and frequent collaborator) run down extended techniques of mutters, curses, intones, and chants behind the mouthpiece, vocalese pushed through the resonant frequencies of their horns. Bassist Brandon Lopez patrols below, occasionally stretching his sound to scratch through any working definition of bass. Twinned drummers Chris Corsano and Tom Rainey set out involved statements—affirming the sensible, meticulous side of their craft, drumming and dueting as the formal presentation of a position paper.

I hadn't heard much of tenor player Ingrid Laubrock before this set, but her boldly rough tone and fierce intelligence set her apart. The players tend to venture out alone, or in small groups, avoiding that fierce noise ensembles of this type might generate. But on such a venerable occasion, such tactics make sense. Each performer is to be savored, like iterations of fine liquors. Each section submits one building block to the esteemable whole.

—ANDREW HAMLIN

AMOS LEE

My Ideal: A Tribute to Chet Baker Sings

Dualtone

Chet Baker made a number of classics throughout his brief, cruel life, but his debut vocal album, *Chet Baker Sings*, might be his summit. Nobody had ever sung like him: boyish, crystalline, with a minimum of inflection. And few trumpeters before or since have gotten to the heart of a melody with such an economy of notes. While communing with *Chet Baker Sings* during lockdown, Amos Lee seemed to connect with all this and more.

Recorded in a single session with pianist and trumpeter David Streim, bassist Madison Rast and drummer Anwar Marshall, *My Ideal: A Tribute to Chet Baker Sings* hits a sweet spot, where it's not a wholesale reimagining nor a brick-

"Gripping emoting": Lakecia Benjamin

EDITOR'S PICK

LAKECIA BENJAMIN

Phoenix

Whirlwind

Between her get-up-and-go and her prodigious talent, alto saxophonist Lakecia Benjamin hasn't made any serious creative missteps. In particular, her well-received John and Alice Coltrane tribute album, 2020's *Pursuance: The Coltranes*, featured leading lights from Ron Carter to Reggie Workman to Meshell Ndgeocello, and showed both the depth of Benjamin's reverence for her forebears and rising cachet in the NYC jazz world.

After that, Benjamin suffered a throttling lockdown, as well as a car accident that could have ended her life. Which brings us to the aptly titled *Phoenix*, which is arguably Benjamin's most accomplished work to date.

Like *Pursuance*, Phoenix is packed with guests, from activist Angela Davis to a spoken-word section from saxophone luminary Wayne Shorter. It's understandable why Benjamin and producer Terri Lyne Carrington might fill the album with influences and colleagues: both to place the artist in a particular lineage and provide an enticing selling point.

Still, the fact remains: It's all window dressing, and going forward, Benjamin doesn't need it.

No, you don't pick up *Phoenix* in the hopes that a more famous figure will pop up. Nor do you do so for the social commentary added by Carrington in post-production, like the sirens and gunshots in "Amerikkan Skin." You listen to hear her play the horn, full stop.

Benjamin's gripping emoting on "Trane," slotted all the way at track 10, speaks volumes in this regard. It's at least spiritually connected to the guest-stuffed *Pursuance*; it shouts out arguably the most famous saxophonist of all time. But in the end, you're not thinking of John or Alice or anyone else. You're thinking of Benjamin, and what all this means to her.

Lakecia Benjamin is no longer emerging. She's emerged. And it's time to hear her unfettered voice.

— MORGAN ENOS

by-brick recreation. Lee successfully gets inside the soul of these songs, like "Like Someone in Love," "But Not for Me" and Baker's signature song, "My Funny Valentine." Sometimes within the span of a single track, his vocal chops prove seemingly perfect for the tunes, only to err on the thin side.

But nitpicking *My Ideal* bar by bar would miss the point: Lee's

obvious reverence for the material shines through. (Although that could have extended to not changing the line "sweet, comic valentine" to "sick, twisted valentine"; Baker's reading was creeping and crepuscular as is.)

A Bob Dylan quote apropos his Sinatra-covering 2010s period comes to mind: "When you start doing these songs, Frank's got to be on your mind.... That's the mountain you have to climb, even if you only get part of the way there." Lee doesn't make it all the way to the top of his chosen mountain; no one can. But if you have any interest in either the interpreter or his subject, Lee's sizable talent and purity of intention make *My Ideal* a must-hear.

—MORGAN ENOS

CHRISTINE CORREA

Just You Stand and Listen With Me

Sunnyside

Christine Correa, a vocalist with an extensive, distinguished track record tackling challenging material, is no stranger to the music of Abbey Lincoln. Her prolific and long-running creative partnership with pianist Ran Blake includes a two-volume tribute focusing on Lincoln's original songs, 2012's *Down Here Below* and 2015's *The Road Keeps Winding*. Correa explores some of the same material on *Just You Stand and Listen With Me*, but where the earlier albums sustained drama with the contrast between the heft and peppery grain of Correa's voice and Blake's spacious but closely observed accompaniment, *Just You Stand* brings urgent intensity to material created in the civil rights movement's crucible.

Her formidable quartet features pianist Andrew Boudreau, bassist Kim Cass, drummer Michael Sarin, and soprano saxophonist Sam Newsome, who serves as an agitated, stimulating interlocutor for Correa. The project centers on *We Insist!*, covering all five songs on Roach's

epochal 1960 Candid album, with "Triptych: Prayer, Protest, Peace" standing out as an elemental supplication. Correa also interprets the biting "Mendacity" and the wordless lament "Garvey's Ghost," Lincoln's two contributions on 1961's *Percussion Bitter Sweet*. Her recitation of Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird" is a tour de force, but the album's standout track, both for Correa's interpretive skills and solos by Boudreau and Newsome, is also the only apolitical piece: Lionel Bart's "Who Will Buy?" Collected together, these songs gather force and continue to speak to the struggle for full equality. It's not an album I expect to return to regularly, but it cuts deeply, pumping new blood into material that transcends the fraught times that called it forth.

—ANDREW GILBERT

AVI GRANITE

In Good Hands

Pet Mantis

If ever there was a launchpad to immerse oneself in Canada's creative jazz and vibrant

scene, Toronto guitarist and composer Avi Granite is the ideal place to start. Although Granite has called New York City his homebase for quite some time, his musical heart is seemingly informed by and driven in part by his Canadian peers. Granite's adventurous new set arrives with the very fittingly titled *In Good Hands* because that's exactly what it is: the perfect realization of invaluable creative relationships and a shared inspiration.

In Good Hands collects a hodgepodge of Granite's original compositions, a handful of which have never been recorded and others plucked from past albums. He then put the 11 tunes "in the good hands" (I did say it was a stellar title) of 11 of his fellow Canadian musicians in exclusively solo performances. The results are truly a revelation as Granite's richly melodic pieces are transformed and reimagined in solo guise.

Many of Granite's bandmates, both in Toronto and New York, are entrusted with reinterpreting his songs and each bring their own uniquely heady perspective to *In Good Hands*. "Like A Magazine" (a high-spirited Mingusian track from 2019's *Orbit*) takes on a whole new intimate life as tenor saxophonist Pat LaBarbera slow-burns his way

ELIZABETH LEITZELL

through it with a warm and arresting tone. Drummer Ted Warren gives a dizzily complex percussion workout to the new piece "19 Seconds Or Less," while Nick Fraser spins abstract beauty with the sticks on Orbit's "Critical Eddie." Meanwhile, guitarist Ted Quinlan's "Like John" (taken from *Snow Umbrellas*) is a particularly glorious dose of bluesy jazz goodness.

With other Granite band regulars like trombonist Tom Richards, bassist Neal Davis, and flugelhornist Jim Lewis pitching in, Avi Granite's latest lives up to its title on this terrific outside-the-box program.

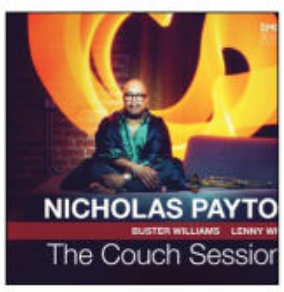
—BRAD COHAN

NICHOLAS PAYTON

The Couch Sessions

Smoke Sessions

The title of this album, Nicholas Payton has said, reflects the idea that "music is therapy . . . Lie on the couch, relax . . . and hopefully this music [can] provide a healing." Such a mission statement might imply cloying or preciousness, but in fact the music here—featuring Payton on piano, Rhodes, and clavinet as well as trumpet, along with bassist Buster Williams and drummer Lenny White—is bracing as well as soothing. The set includes offerings from the oeuvres of Geri Allen, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Benny Golson,



and Keith Jarrett, as well as both Payton and Williams.

A distinctive facet of this production is the presence of spoken-word intros to many of the tracks. Payton has grafted samples from interviews with Allen, Hancock, Shorter, and Jarrett onto his trio's readings of their work; his own musings are included as well, as are the recollections of the late vocalist, producer, and promoter Meghan Stabile in "From a Flicker to a Flame," which is dedicated to her, and a snippet of Max Roach declaring his distaste for the racist implications of the word "jazz" as a prelude to Payton's "Jazz Is A Four-Letter Word," a reprise of a piece he originally showcased on 2017's *Afro-Caribbean Mixtape*.

The "healing" here is reflected in the profoundly spiritual sense of honoring elders and ancestors that manifests itself in the song selection, the inclusion of the composers' words in their own voices, and the principals' obvious dedication to nurture the living legacy of what Chicago's AACM (reflecting Roach's aversion to the word "jazz") call "Great Black Music, Ancient to the Future." In that spirit, Meghan Stabile gets the final word: "I am a representative of the vision . . . I feel like it will outlive me."

—DAVID WHITEIS

TYLER MITCHELL

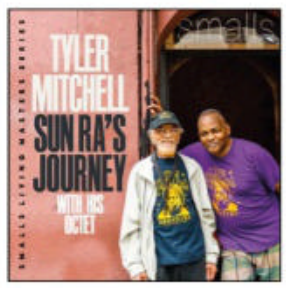
Sun Ra's Journey

Cellar/SmallsLIVE

If you had to pick what period would be a 98-year-old man's busiest, you would not normally choose the most recent three years of his time on Earth. And yet, here is Marshall Allen—the leader of Sun Ra's Arkestra who picked up the baton when its originator departed from this hemisphere in 1993—readying Arkestra gigs and solo events in which to showcase his talents as saxophonist, kora player, flautist, and electronic wind instrumentalist (EWI).

With *Sun Ra's Journey* from bassist Tyler Mitchell and his Octet—a recording at Smalls Jazz Club with Allen as its featured guest—he gets his generous cake from a fellow free traveler, dollops on the icing, eats it, then goes for seconds.

Mitchell's last album, 2022's *Dancing Shadows*, also featured Allen and Ra songs—along with Thelonious Monk's "Skippy"—both



as their calmest and most clamorous. This time out, however, any clamor you hear comes without Ra's famed carnival kaleidoscopic parade vibe. For this live gig with tenor saxophonist Chris Hemingway, alto saxophonist Nicoletta Manzini, trumpeter Giveton Gelin, pianist Farid Barron, drummer Wayne Smith, and percussionists Ron McBee and Elson Nacimento, Mitchell arranges the octet and Allen not so much as if they were playing things *straight*. Rather, angular Ra tracks such as "Love in Outer Space" and "Fate in a Pleasant Mood" get air to breathe without their usual claustrophobic, circus instrumentation.

While the funk of Monk's "Skippy" is given more slippery soulfulness than on its hard, rhythmic studio version, Allen's "New Dawn"—penned for the Arkestra album *Of Abstract Dreams* and initially recorded with strings—finds the spry, menacing saxophonist and the intuitive, cushion-y bassist at spare, lean, mean interplay. A fine friendship and mentorship between Mitchell and Allen is truly part of this journey.

—A.D. AMOROSI

JOE FIEDLER

Solo/The Howland Sessions

Multiphonics

The word "funky" does not get applied to a solo horn album very often. Yet a low-down groove runs through "The Jack Rabbit," the opening track of Joe Fiedler's solo trombone recital. Even when he strays from the rhythmic kick and moves into more of a solo section, the pulse lingers on. A similar bit of funk threads through "Stinger" as Fielder delves into, a guttural tone, buzzing through the stinger mute that inspired the song, and sounding like one of those Muppets he knows from his day job as a *Sesame Street* music director.

Solo/The Howland Sessions was inspired by the 50th anniversary of German trombonist Albert Mangelsdorff's solo performance at the Jazz Now! Festival in Munich (and his subsequent album *Trombirds*). The 1972 festival marked the first time a 'bone player took to the stage alone, inspiring others such as George Lewis, Steve Swell, and Walter Wierbos to explore the format. Rather than pay homage, Fiedler takes Mangelsdorff's conception as a chance to display his

own complex blend of technique and ideas. Throughout the album, he uses multiphonics, blowing through his horn and vocalizing at the same time, creating a rich texture.

"The Long No" presents one of the most riveting works; the three-part piece starts

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"Meditative, warm, insular, even *spongy*": Marcus Strickland

EDITOR'S PICK

MARCUS STRICKLAND TWI-LIFE

The Universe's Wildest Dream

Strick Muzik

This mesmerizing album bears repeated plays without fully revealing its secrets; a meditative, warm, insular, even *spongy* recording that's as immersive as it is beautiful, like a small pod both circling earth and protecting it with love and care.

The Universe's Wildest Dream is led by veteran saxophonist and composer Marcus Strickland, joined by Mitch Henry (keyboards), Kyle Miles (bass), and Charles Haynes (drums), with guests including guitarist Lionel Loueke and vocalists Christie Dashiell and Ras Stimulant.

Employing sensitive solos, electronic beats, cushioned grooves, and atmospheric production, the music could qualify for Quiet Storm status, or a long-lost George Duke work from his post-Zappa, pre-commercial period. Even after 10 plays, the music deepens: odd samples, evocative solos, spoken word queries, and blissful sounds give the album a feeling of mystery, a conspiracy theory in jazz/soul/electronic sound.

In "Prayer," a voice intones "the wealthiest earthlings plan to discover, sample and profit from random minerals and elements scattered throughout the void beyond," as Strickland's bass clarinet intones intergalactic mischief. Here and elsewhere, the notion of earth as singular, without parallel in the universe, is given weight. The mellifluous robo-funk of "Dust Ball Fantasy" and "Infinity" recall Miles Davis' *Decoy*. Alex Jones is heard ranting below in "Black Matter," as a joyous song, a celebration, rises above. The hop-skipping "Joy for Jupiter" closes the album, Strickland writing "If there's anything making you gloomy, remind yourself that there's a huge planet with 79 moons protecting inner planets such as Earth from comets and asteroids with its gravitational field. In other words, 'it's not the end of the world.'"

— KEN MICALLEF

off like a ballad rising from the two tones. Over a pedal note, he adds a wah-wah attack, blurring the line between his voice and his instrument. Although the blend of pitches can be harsh at first, they produce a full sound that make you forget this is a solo performance.

—MIKE SHANLEY

MAKAYA McCRAVEN

International Anthem @Public Records (Volume 3)

Qobuz

Makaya McCraven likes to keep his catalog in flux. Although his latest, most lauded project, *In These Times*, was presented upon its fall release as his magnum opus, offshoots and alternatives were inevitable. Hence these four selections from I*n These Times*, performed live at Brooklyn's intimate Public Records venue four days before its late September release and available exclusively on Qobuz,

a streaming and downloading service that caters to audiophiles.

First off, the sound quality is indeed superb, with immaculate separation between the instruments played by the live octet, including a string quartet. Second, the personnel does not include a pianist or guitarist, one reason McCraven refers to the material as "pared-down versions" of the songs on the album, even though each of the four compositions is longer in live performance. That's felt most keenly on "The Knew Untitled," which on the studio version features a ballerina-like piano entry and a memorable guitar solo from Matt Gold. The Brooklyn performance, which also cuts back on McCraven's drum prominence, uses a longer, more graceful arc via Brandee Younger's harp, the string quartet, and either an EWI from De'Sean Jones or something McCraven had programmed on computer.

Two other selections—"Dream Another" and "Lullaby"—are both exquisite and relatively faithful to the album. But the best reason to pick up *International Anthem @ Public Records (Volume 3)* is for the rendition of "This Place That Place." The pizzicato from the strings is more forceful, McCraven turns up the rhythmic heat, and Jones engages him via a squalling tenor sax showcase down the stretch. Suddenly *In These Times* they are a'changing, and the sound of surprise becomes the perfect aperitif for the project.

—BRITT ROBSON

SONG YI JEON & VINICIUS GOMES

Home

Greenleaf

On Song Yi Jeon's first two albums, the South Korean vocalist recorded in quartet settings that showcased her wondrous voice and creativity as a composer and arranger. Her new album, *Home*, is a very different kind of project, though her previous work provides hints at where she's heading. Her group on 2015's *Straight* included São Paulo guitarist Leandro Pellegrino while 2018's *Movement of Lives* featured Rio-born pianist Vitor Gonçalves. *Home* is a duo collaboration with Brazilian guitarist Vinicius Gomes, and it ranks among the year's best releases.

Gomes is a rising star himself with extensive experience backing vocalists such as Rosa Passos, Jane Duboc, and Zizi Possi, but *Home* involves far more than the usual role of accompaniment. For much of the album Song Yi interacts with Gomes sans lyrics; take her acrobatic wordless vocals on "Dancing Stars," one of her impressive originals. Featuring her Korean lyrics, "Expecting Spring" is a sprightly melody that builds to a supple echo of Jobim's "Double

Rainbow." Her ethereal legato melody "A Lonesome Place" sets the scene for "A Timeless Place," the Jimmy Rowles standard with Norma Winstone lyrics that's become a go-to set piece for ambitious vocalists. Song Yi navigates the wending narrative with requisite drama and restraint, almost whispering the key line "Beauty's only an illusion."

Gomes contributes two other originals, the exultant, wordless opener "Eleventh House" and the atmospheric, melismatic "Flow," which at seven minutes is the album's longest track. The shortest is a sublime two-and-a-half-minute version of Keith Jarrett's "Prism" that feels like it was lifted from a chamber ensemble. The album closes with Dominguinhos's forró anthem "Nilopolitano" taken at a brisk clip, with Song Yi singing the melody in tight tandem with Gomes' guitar. It's a bit of casual virtuosity that shows this party is just getting started.

—ANDREW GILBERT

DEMETRIUS NABORS

Evolution

DKN

Pianist and composer Demetrius Nabors is one of the go-to musicians on the Detroit jazz scene and has performed with a plethora of national artists such as R&B singer/songwriter Kem, guitarist Tim Bowman, and trumpeter Willie Bradley. Aside from his work as a sideman, Nabors has released a number of acclaimed albums, including 2021's *Perseverance*, which tackled his experiences during the turbulence of 2020.

His fifth release, *Evolution*, is inspired by his days studying with legendary pianist and educator Geri Allen at the University of Michigan. The compositions are direct evidence of Nabors' progression as a composer, producer, arranger, and pianist since that time and could be called a tribute of sorts to his late, great mentor. Off the bat, Nabors entices the listeners with a seductive groove in "Mesmerize" based on a mixed meter with a bass ostinato.

"Strollin' Down Blaine" slows things down a bit, with a much more mellow vibe influenced by his time playing in church. Nabors sought to replicate

the feeling of church members strolling down the aisle during service, so he set the tune to a smoother beat; bass and piano take center stage.

On each track, Nabors' goal is to bring the listener on a wide-ranging excursion, experiencing a myriad of emotions. He does just that on every song, especially on the expressive tune "Mourning Widow," which features a mix of turbulent yet graceful melodies via strings, and Andrew Bishop on clarinet.

All of the songs on *Evolution* are Nabors

PETRA RICHTEROVA

originals, except for the John Coltrane standard "Giant Steps." Nabors' arrangement of that tune gives it a smoother jazz feel, and Detroit saxophonist Desean Jones, also a Coltrane head, does an amazing job tackling the difficult chord changes throughout the piece.

—VERONICA JOHNSON

JUSSI REIJONEN

Three Seconds/ Kolme Toista

Challenge

Even in our present jazz moment, when the art form is worldwide and vital, albums that come as complete surprises are relatively rare. *Three Seconds/ Kolme Toista* is a stunner.

Jussi Reijonen has released only one previous recording (un, nine years ago). He is a Finnish guitarist and oud player who has also lived in Jordan, Tanzania, Oman, Lebanon, and the United States. It is possible that no one has ever assembled a nonet quite like the one here.

There are three Americans (trumpeter Jason Palmer, drummer Vancil Cooper, bassist Kyle Miles), two Turks (trombonist Bulut Gülen, pianist Utar Artun), a Jordanian/Iraqi (violinist Layth Sidiq), a Palestinian (cellist Naseem Alatrash), and a Japanese (percussionist Keita Ogawa).

Three Seconds is a five-part suite that grips you from the opening notes of the first movement, "The Veil." A haunting, premonitory fanfare is introduced by Miles on arco bass. That theme becomes a dramatic looming presence when the whole band takes it over. In this 42-minute multidimensional work, Reijonen, as composer/arranger, has many sonorities available. He blends the colors boldly. The music sounds both personal and majestic. Its first impression is power, when the ensemble, with its two drummers thundering, hits full force. Yet there are many moments when Reijonen's expansive sonic world contracts to fine details: Sidiq's violin softly keening on "Transient"; Reijonen's guitar alone in the open spaces of "The Weaver"; Palmer's trumpet announcements on "Verso."

The variety of ethnicities and instruments makes for a unique, heady mix. Among this album's many revelations is the gradual realization that it truly is a suite. That enigmatic theme at the beginning recurs throughout, albeit sometimes subliminally. When it returns explicitly, like at the end of "Verso," it is a rush. This album is a single, unified, diverse, overwhelming statement.

—THOMAS CONRAD

DAN WEISS TRIO

Dedication

Cygnus

Each of the three previous outings from next-level drummer Dan Weiss' long-running piano trio proved to be consistently inventive and engrossing, stretching the fabric of jazz's most lived-in format. This latest entry, continuing to highlight the fathomless connection between the leader, pianist Jacob Sacks, and bassist Thomas Morgan, is equally compelling. Working his way through a series of tributes to family members, artistic influences, and a figure of importance in the broader sphere, Weiss opens up more than ever before. The enigmatic allure of his music remains fully intact, but you certainly leave this album knowing more about the man and his muses.

Opening with "For Tim Smith," Weiss nods to the founder of prog-punk band Cardiacs through direct harmonic engagement and imaginative twists. Later, he plays the praises of other musical inspirations. In a serpentine commendation for Conlon Nancarrow (and his *Studies for Player Piano*), overlaid time cycles create a dizzying foundational

design. Bowing to Burt Bacharach, the trio deals in deceptively simple soundcraft. Drawing from Elvin Jones' deft drumming (beside John Coltrane on the saxophonist's "One Down, One Up" from *Live at the Half Note*), Weiss offers a seminar in building percussive bridges with phraseology. And, finding an honoree within the ranks, he spotlights Sacks with an angular panorama of the pianist's wide-ranging skills.

Eyeing the silver screen, Weiss taps into spiritual and celestial veins in saluting director Andrei Tarkovsky. Making a rare political statement, the drummer addresses the murder of George Floyd and all that surrounded it. And looking closer to home, he creates circles of warmth, love, and tenderness in separate dedications to his six-year-old daughter Vivienne and late grandmother May. With Dedication, Dan Weiss paints expansive portraits that say as much about the gravity of his art as they do about the people he recognizes.

—DAN BILAWSKY

FRANK CARLBERG TRIO

Reflections 1952

577

During the 1950s Pablo Picasso turned his attention to some of the major figures of art history, reinterpreting their work through his own distinctive lens. Most notably, he undertook a series of paintings based on Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, crafting nearly 60 pieces that obsessively examined, deconstructed, and reconfigured the original masterpiece.

Frank Carlberg doesn't explicitly mention Picasso in reference to *Reflections 1952*. The album looks back on a pair of sessions from that year where Monk was joined by bassist Gary Mapp and either Art Blakey or Max Roach on drums (eventually released on Prestige as *Thelonious Monk Trio*). Yet the interpretations rendered by Carlberg, along with drummer Francisco Mela and bassist John

Hébert, are undertaken in the same prismatic Cubist spirit.

Carlberg and his trio approach the material from a variety of oblique angles: "Spherical Nightmares," for instance, does little more than hint at the sharp-edged melody of "Monk's Dream," as if it's being recomposed from a distant memory. "Azure Sphere" slows the theme of "Blue Monk" to an ominous crawl, while Mela's vocal chants help turn "Bemsha Swing" into the mesmerizing "Bemsha Cubano."

Standards are given similar treatment, with "Sweet and Lovely" patchworked through a Monkish kaleidoscope

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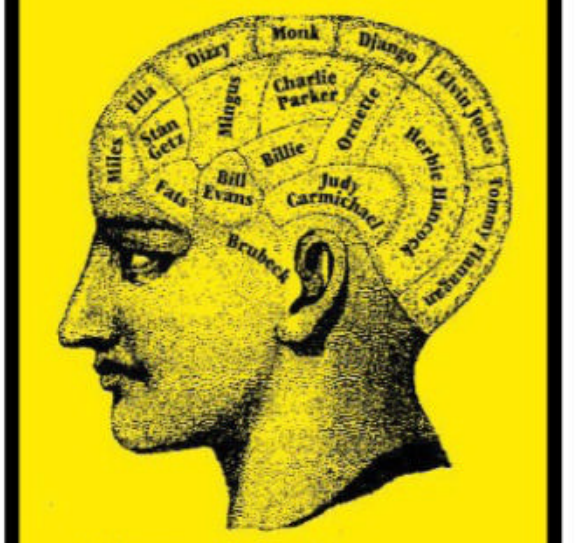

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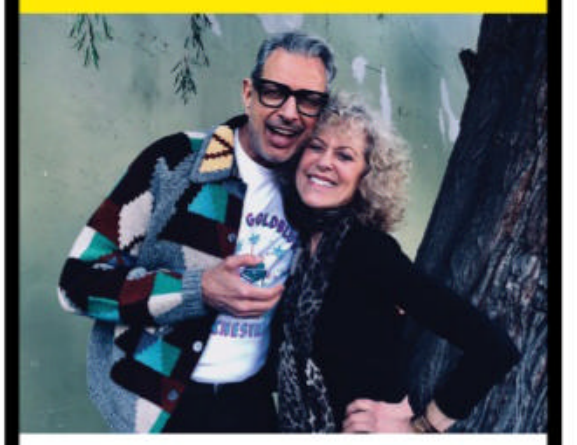

UPCOMING GUESTS
SAMARA JOY
PASQUALE GRASSO
MARTIN SHORE
On NPR and your favorite podcast platform or at jazzinspired.com

and "These Foolish Things" crystallized into a stark solo piano rumination. The sampled voice of poet Paul Lichter is added to the collage on two tracks, reciting Monk quotes on "Reflecting Reflections" and puns on the iconic pianist's name from various writers on "Nicknames," a refraction of "Little Rootie Tootie." Singer Priya Carlberg, daughter of the pianist and vocalist Christine Correa, provides a haunting read of "Just a Gigolo" for two separate renditions that embody the elegiac regret at the core of the song. Monk tributes abound, but Carlberg takes a fresh approach that both honors and dissects its source.

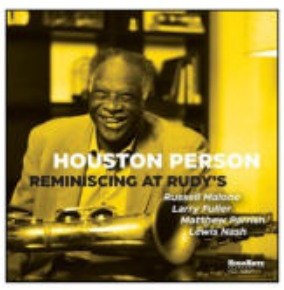
—SHAUN BRADY

HOUSTON PERSON

Reminiscing at Rudy's

High Note

At the age of 88, Houston Person remains a reliably consistent interpreter of song. He has never been particularly extreme or outrageous, preferring to keep his cool: His tenor saxophone is unfailingly expressive, his melodies rarely stray



far, and regardless of the configuration he's working with at the moment, his tone and feel are recognizably his own.

That's not to say he's lacking in any way. With a discography that now reportedly exceeds 75 albums as a leader, Person has rarely misfired. His latest, *Reminiscing at Rudy's*, is no exception. As its title implies, the set was recorded in a single day at the Van Gelder Studio in New Jersey, a place whose very name suggests familiarity and comfort. Joining Person for the session are guitarist Russell Malone, pianist Larry Fuller, bassist Matthew Parrish, and drummer Lewis Nash. They work well together—no big surprises here—and, with Person self-producing, come up with 10 numbers that both emphasize the leader's undiminished skills and class, and showcase the musicians' rapport.

The tracks, for the most part, are also familiar: Rodgers and Hart's "My Romance," Henry Mancini's "Moon River," Cole Porter's "At Long Last Love." But there are a few that give Person and his ensemble opportunities to stretch, and they are among the highlights. A Cedar Walton tune, "I'll Let You Know," elicits a breathy, dreamy solo from Person and gives Fuller, in particular, all the space he needs to reimagine Walton's piano parts. Percy Mayfield's classic 1950 blues ballad, "Please Send Me Someone to Love," is a perfect vehicle not only for Person and Fuller but for Malone's oh-so-sweet guitar. And even Paul Anka's perpetually schmaltzy "Put Your Head on My Shoulder" is redeemed in these hands, quite lovely when stripped down to its most basic attributes.

—JEFF TAMARKIN

ROY ELDRIDGE QUARTET/ELLA FITZGERALD QUINTET

In Concert

SteepleChase

Roy Eldridge's name on this disc is a bit of a red herring. The trumpeter plays the first two songs, accompanied by the same band that will back Ella Fitzgerald on the remainder of the program. Make no mistake: This recording belongs to the First Lady of Song, who's in top form for this May 1959 Copenhagen performance.

Granted, it's hard to find a Fitzgerald title from this period where she wasn't in top form, so perhaps *In Concert* is just par for the course. But what a par. Her flawless flower of a voice coats each song like a soothing balm; only on close listening do we hear details like her masterful rubato on "You Brought Me A New Kind of Love" or the delicately sung syllables of "Lady Be

Good" (here even slower than on her then-recent *Gershwin Songbook* album). But there are also delights right on the surface: "All Right, Okay, You Win" is loaded with Fitzgerald's famous ad libs in both scat and lyric ("He got eyes like diamonds, teeth shine like yellow gold—FORT KNOX!") The album's jewel is an on-point reading of "Whatever Lola Wants." Fitzgerald melds with precision to Gus Johnson's drums, then guitarist Ellis melds with precision to Fitzgerald; they hold the line through more of Ella's rubato, flourishes and growls, moving on a dime into high gear when the song becomes a medley with "Who's Got the Pain?"

Does that make the Eldridge tunes throwaways? Hardly. Both "Soft Winds" and the rhythm-changes "Roy's Riff" are brilliant showcases for his serrated-edge trumpet sound and timeless swing, the former doubling as a feature for Ellis's surprisingly caustic guitar. (He and Eldridge are a magical combination). Good as they are, though, they're appetizers. Ella is the main course.

—MICHAEL J. WEST

YVONNICK PRENÉ

Listen!

Sunnyside

Yvonnick Prené, originally from Paris, now from New York, is on the very short list of major living jazz harmonica players. Because of its rarity in jazz, it is natural to think of the chromatic harmonica as a novelty instrument. But *Listen!* makes you take this device seriously and revel in its unique, rich, alluring sonorities. When Prené plays the chromatic harmonica, it becomes a fully articulate vehicle for authentic emotional expression.

He is a nonconformist instrumentally but a traditionalist stylistically. His native tongue is hard bop. His preferred ensemble format is the classic trumpet/tenor saxophone quintet (think Miles Davis, Horace Silver, the Jazz Messengers). Of course, in Prené's band, the harmonica replaces the trumpet.

It is striking how natural a harmonica (with its similar range) sounds in the trumpet chair. The other strong players here are Dayna Stephens, Kevin Hays, Clovis Nicholas, and Bill Stewart. There are three tracks associated with Miles Davis. "Dig" (from Miles's 1951 Prestige album of

that name, with Sonny Rollins) is a bold choice, a flat-out burner. Prené nails it. "Mystic Minor" is a Prené original, but it recalls Miles's "All Blues." Victor Feldman's "Seven Steps to Heaven" was composed for Miles. The clever arrangement by Steve Feifke maximizes the tune's essential quality of celebration. The producer of *Listen!*, trumpeter Jeremy Pelt, plays on this track—and smokes it. Prené has to solo after an actual hot trumpet player. No problem. He is quick-on-quick, and flawless.

But the song that most fully reveals the unique capabilities of the chromatic harmonica is "She's Funny That Way." Lester Young's version is considered definitive, but Prené's is more poignant. His interpretation proves that no instrument can tug at your heart with yearning quite like a chromatic harmonica in the hands of a master.

—THOMAS CONRAD

ROBERTA DONNAY

Blossom-ing!

Village Jazz Café

A San Francisco Bay Area mainstay, vocalist Roberta Donnay has earned an avid following over the past quarter century with a repertoire focusing on pre-bop treasures. Her 13th release, *Blossom-ing!* covers a whole different musical realm, and it's a particularly felicitous pairing. With her small, pliable, deceptively sweet sound, Donnay possesses an ideal instrument to evoke the wit of Blossom Dearie, the sui generis vocalist and pianist whose cult following gradually expanded upon her return to New York City after a mid-1950s Paris sojourn.

Instead of the horn-laden arrangements found on most of Donnay's recordings *Blossom-ing!* features a nimble rhythm section with bassist Ruth Davies, drummer Mark Lee, São Paulo-reared guitarist José Neto, and pianist Mike Greensill, who's the album's secret sauce. He spent some four decades as accompanist, arranger, and husband of the late, beloved jazz/cabaret singer Wesla Whitfield, and he swings with gentle authority that serves Donnay, who co-arranged all the tracks, marvelously well.

Part of what makes the album delightful is the range of material. Some usual suspects are apprehended with style, but she casts a wide net, including only one David Frishberg tune ("Peel Me a Grape" at just the right tempo). Few singers have ever conveyed the gobsmacked impact of a crush as mischievously as Dearie, a sensation that Donnay conjures with the Carolyn Leigh/Cy Coleman gems "You Fascinate Me So" and "It Amazes Me." She also makes a compelling case for the revival of the rarely covered tunes "Moonlight Savings Time" and "Spring in Manhattan."

If there's anything

missing, it's more by Dearie herself. Donnay includes one of her best pieces, the bossa-tinged "Inside a Silent Tear" (with Peter King), but Dearie produced a wealth of songs with some great lyricists, like Jack Segal ("Good-Bye Country Boy") and Johnny Mercer ("I'm Shadowing You").

—ANDREW GILBERT

JOHNNY HAMMOND

Gears

Jazz Dispensary

Before the onslaught of 1970s disco-jazz and the flywheel Latin-laced dance music of the Salsoul Orchestra and Dr. Buzzard's Original Savannah Band, the production team of Larry and Fonce Mizell were adding string arrayments and four-on-the-floor rhythms to its charges for maximum dancefloor exposure. One such client was Kentucky-born Johnny "Hammond" Smith, the Hammond B-3 jazz organist who had been adding swampy Southern soul to his post-postbop diet since his earliest Prestige label sides, 1959's *That Good Feelin'* and

1960's *Talk That Talk*.

Unafraid of lushly stringed things and sprightly melodic funk, the Mizell Brothers and Hammond Smith teamed first on 1974's grooving *Gambler's Life* and then—on sessions featuring bassist Chuck Rainey, drummer Harvey Mason, keyboardist Jerry Peters, a cadre of background vocalists and an orchestra of brass, reeds, violins and synth players—for the sensual, shifting *Gears*.

The Donald Byrd-like simmering, looped soul-jazz of "Tell Me What to Do" leads into the disco thunder of the nearly seven-minute-long "Los Conquistadores Chocolates"

in what appears to be the Mizell brothers' (both songs' composers) vision of a night's seduction. Cosmopolitan and quirky, the mix of flutes, vibraphone, and wah-wah heavy guitar, together with Hammond's dirty chord changes and un-ornate organ solo, make this epic spin like a top. The same can be said of the ebullient Smith/Mizell co-write "Fantasy," the ethereal downtempo romancer "Lost on 23rd Street," and the cheerfully funky "Can't We Smile?"—each of which portrays jazz as a joyful communal exercise, a party. With that vibe, it is no surprise that Smith and *Gears* are a favorite of the crate-digging set and hip-hop samplers everyone.

—A.D. AMOROSI

NADJE NOORDHUIS

Full Circle

Newvelle

When Nadje Noordhuis puts a trumpet or flugelhorn to her lips, the sound of hope, warmth, and light emerges. That's made clear on her previous projects—an eponymous 2012 debut, separate duo dates with pianist Luke Howard and percussionist James Shipp, the transcendent *Gullfoss*—and it's perfectly apparent on this enchanting set.

Working with a top-notch quartet featuring pianist Fred Hersch, bassist Thomas Morgan and drummer Rudy Royston, Noordhuis brings a sense of wonder and grace to the fore. Opening with the absorbing "Little Song," the band immediately engages with the art of odd-metered dance. It's a spellbinding start and the first of many numbers to highlight the magic of the Noordhuis-Hersch combination. "Hudson" follows, gliding along in waltz time. "Northern Star" presents an aural aurora, reflecting the beauty of a colorful night sky. "Entwine" comforts with its melodic and harmonic embrace.

Taken together, those four selections showcase Noordhuis' mesmeric horn work, tuneful writing, and first-rate bandmates. The flipside manages to maintain that focus

while expanding on it. The title track, which includes a standout solo from Hersch, is at once driven and relaxed. "Ventura" flows with positive energy and opens space for Morgan. "Braidwood," set in motion by Royston's searching statements and low-gear groove, makes for a hip and joyous journey. "Nebula," offering a beautiful brume of stardust, swirls as it seduces.

As the fourth and final release in Newvelle Records' Renewal Collection, *Full Circle* is in good company with albums from pianist Elan Mehler, saxophonist Michael Blake, and jazz icon Dave Liebman. But it also stands mighty tall on its own. Whether hearing this music on high-end vinyl, with the deepest of sonic dimensions, or in digital form, where a charming bonus track extends the program, the appeal of Noordhuis' work is ever so obvious to the ears.

—DAN BILAWSKY

OORT SMOG

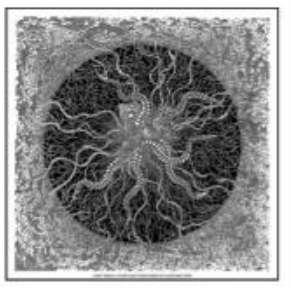
Every Motherfucker Is Your Brother

AKP

Oort Smog—the duo of saxophonist Patrick Shiroishi and drummer Mark Kimbrell—file their brand of explorative aggro-jazz under "brutal-prog," a term the iconoclastic polymath Weasel Walter originally coined for his long-running group the Flying Luttenbachers. Shiroishi and Kimbrell's sonic assault nods to the Luttenbachers' breakneck rigor but it also expands into the kinds of blissed-out vistas and ritualistic probes navigated by Battle Trance and Little Women.

While Oort Smog channels those aforementioned bands, the duo clearly inhabits its own sound-world on its powerful second effort, *Every Motherfucker Is Your Brother*. This single 29-minute composition is a stunning achievement. Shiroishi and Kimbrell have refined their craft since their shambolic 2019 debut *Smeared Pulse Transfers*. It's a testament to their laser-eyed focus that spanned 18 months of writing and recording time, commenced during the pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests.

The ever-mutating, multifaceted "Every Motherfucker…" morphs from the tranquil atmospheric



landscapes of its first few minutes (envision a droning sci-fi jazz backdrop to *Blade Runner*) into ghostly, soaring sax blows and heavy-hitting, busy beats that propel the epic track toward another stratosphere. At the halfway mark, Shiroishi and Kimbrell switch gears again, settling into a groove laden with shifting time signatures that has the duo firing on all cylinders but with razor-sharp accuracy, and they don't look back. The telepathic bond they share throughout is top-notch.

Impeccably recorded inside the cavernous confines of L.A. venue Human Resources, *Every Motherfucker Is Your Brother* expresses a hopefulness and urgency made for these times.

—BRAD COHAN

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The Definition of Swing

It's a key characteristic of jazz, and here are six prime examples

BY TED KOOSHIAN

Ever since I was in the seventh grade, I've had a passion for jazz. I have always listened to and enjoyed a wide variety of musical genres—classical, pop, soul, rock, etc.—but the incident that had a huge impact on my life, and turned me into a future "jazz musician," was the day my junior high school band director played me an Oscar Peterson record. Not only was I blown away by Oscar's obviously incredible technique, but his sense of "swing" really spoke to me; every note is placed in exactly the right moment in time. Swing is such a crucial part of jazz—it gives a sense of propelling the music forward, and it's hard to put into words how good music feels when it's truly swinging. Here are six examples of swing that genuinely move me.

Oscar Peterson and Sarah Vaughan

"I've Got the World on a String"

How Long Has This Been Going On? (Pablo, 1978)

I could have picked any of hundreds of Oscar tracks to demonstrate music that is really swinging in the best possible way, but I chose this one because of the added benefit of the always-grooving Sarah Vaughan. Having Joe Pass, Ray Brown, and Louie Bellson playing doesn't hurt the feel either. Everybody's swinging, aOscar's and Joe's fills and solos are perfect. Oscar's performance—his time feel, and his deep-rooted blues influence —is always amazing.

Eddie Harris

"The Shadow of Your Smile"

The In Sound (Atlantic, 1965)

Ron Carter and Billy Higgins are locked in together like they're one entity. When the band is playing the heads, in and out, there are instrumental breaks at the ends of phrases; the swing feel carries through these silent breaks, as the listener anticipates what's coming next. There's very little that's flashy or virtuosic here; it's tasteful, melodic, and swinging. Cedar Walton and Eddie take one chorus each, and then play the head out—the tune fades out over a coda turnaround vamp, almost like they couldn't end it because they were having too much fun.

Jeff Hamilton Trio

"I Love Being Here with You"

The Best Things Happen (Azica, 2004)

These guys are in the pocket! Another case of every single note in the right place. Jeff is a master of this driving shuffle/swing feel, and pianist Tamir Hendelman swings hard, in that Gene Harris / Oscar Peterson manner. There's a great sequence where Tamir plays a "shout chorus" and trades fours with Jeff, and bassist Chris Luty takes the bridge. I love how Jeff accents the breaks during the shout sections with his bass drum. This performance and arrangement of the old Peggy Lee song is infectious.

Frank Sinatra with the Count Basie Orchestra

"Fly Me to the Moon"

Sinatra at the Sands (Reprise, 1966)

I don't think an article about "swingingest tracks" would be complete without a mention of the Basie band, kicked along by the outstanding drummer Sonny Payne. I'm a big fan of Sinatra's voice and his swing feel, and this live disc with Basie may be my favorite Sinatra album. Basie's sparse piano playing is completely opposed to Oscar's florid style, but both undeniably swing hard.

George Benson

"Beyond the Sea"

20/20 (Warner Bros, 1985)

This cut is the only jazz track on an album of primarily '80s pop music, but it showed that Benson still had that swing feel. His vocal combines that feeling with some pop sensibilities, but the band on this track definitely evokes Basie. And no wonder, with a killing horn arrangement by Frank Foster, plus Freddie Green's signature guitar comping. The song features a swinging shout chorus, and then a swinging guitar solo by George, with him scatting along in his trademark style.

Oscar Peterson and Stan Getz

"I Want to Be Happy"

Stan Getz and the Oscar Peterson Trio (Verve, 1957)

I added another Oscar Peterson track! I couldn't help it. This one is remarkable because there's no drummer, and yet the band is as tight and swinging as can be, because of everyone's impeccable sense of time and fantastic feel. Once again, Ray Brown is on bass, this time with the exceptional Herb Ellis on guitar. The way they, and of course Oscar and Stan, hold the time together at this tempo is terrific. Their internal metronomes are really tuned and in sync. ***JT***

*Born in San Jose, California, pianist/keyboardist **Ted Kooshian** grew up in the Bay Area and started playing piano in the second grade. He moved to New York City in 1987 and since then has worked with Aretha Franklin, Chuck Berry, Edgar Winter, Marvin Hamlisch, Sarah Brightman, Blood, Sweat, and Tears, and Il Divo. On Broadway he's performed in such hit shows as* Mamma Mia, The Lion King, Aida, Come Fly Away, Dirty Rotten Scoundrels, *and* Spamalot. *He has performed at the Detroit Jazz Festival, the Syracuse Jazz Festival, the Sun Valley Jazz Festival, and the Clifford Brown Jazz Festival, as well as festivals in Germany, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia. In addition to leading his own groups and projects, Kooshian has been a member of the Ed Palermo Big Band since 1994.*

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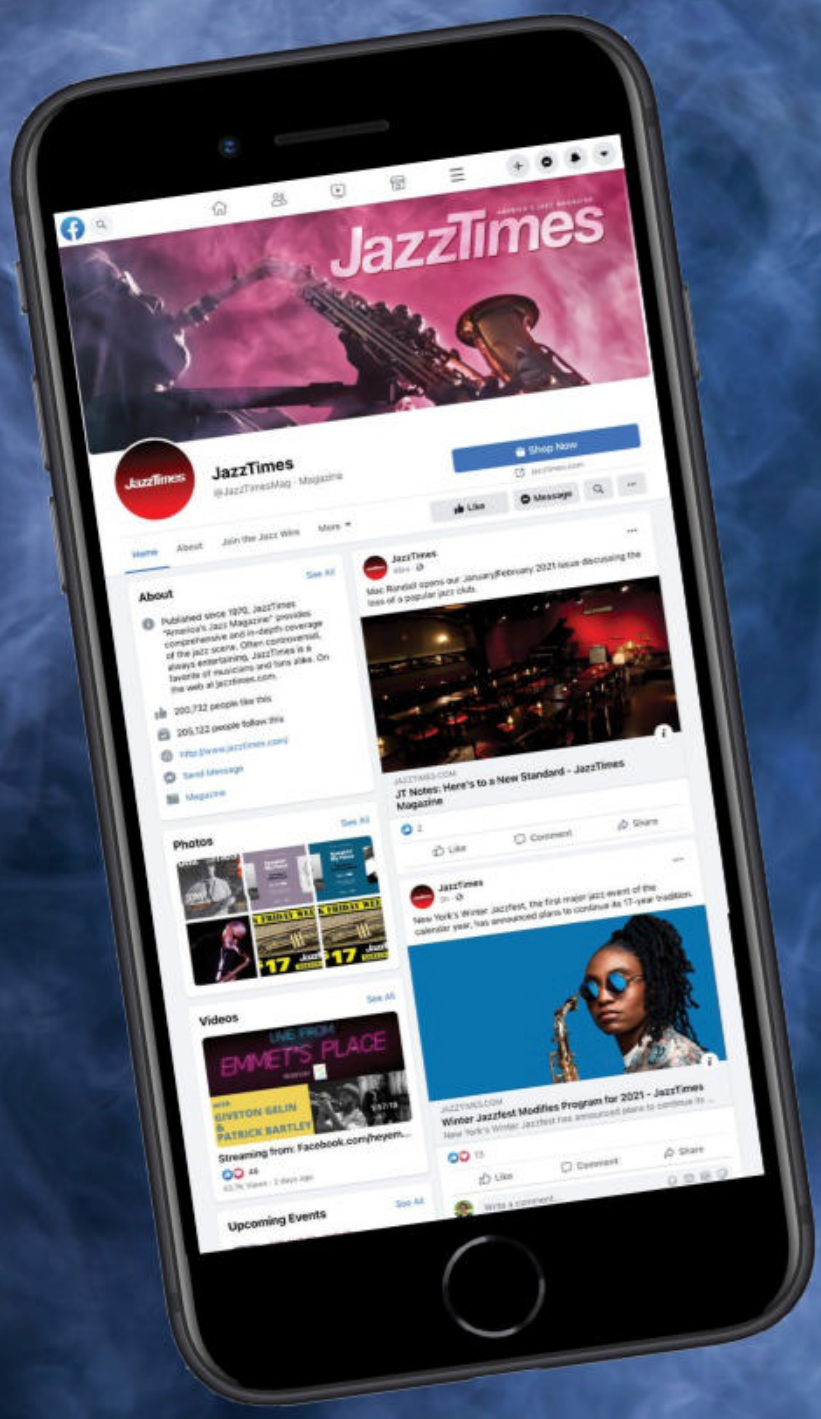

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